

# Open Adoption from the Other Side

How does your child's birth mother feel about being called a "birth mother," about the frequency and format of contact, her voice in the relationship, and more? We asked five birth mothers in open adoptions these questions. Here are their answers. **BY BARBARA HEREL**



**A**n open adoption relationship is truly a work in progress (heavy emphasis on the *work*). Five years after adopting my daughter, Beth, I find there's still a part of me that holds back around her birth mother, Kim. A part of me that sounds a little too bright, too upbeat, too careful. For instance, I never refer to myself as "Mom" in front of Kim, and call Beth by her name rather than saying "my daughter" when in conversation with her, for fear of causing her pain.

Though the rational part of me knows that

Kim is beyond busy as a working, single mom of three, I worry when I haven't heard from her in a while. *Is she all right? Is the pain of not having her daughter to hold every day too much for her? Should I call her? Am I being a pain in the ass?*

These are the thoughts that rattle around my adoptive-mom brain. But, what's rattling around a birth mom's brain? What does figuring out this open adoption thing feel like for her?

I got in touch with five birth mothers. We

covered a *lot* of ground. Along with their invaluable insights on eight key topics I summed up takeaways that can help us, adoptive parents, do what's in our control to improve our relationships with our kids' birth families. They certainly made me think about my own relationship with Kim in a new way.

### The Women I Interviewed:

- ➔ **Margaret**, 21, placed her newborn daughter seven months ago.
- ➔ **Courtney Chatterton**, 22, placed her two-week-old daughter two-and-a-half years ago.
- ➔ **Kathleen Nielsen**, 30, placed her newborn son 12 years ago.
- ➔ **Lisa**, 32, placed her three-days-old daughter a year-and-a-half ago.
- ➔ **Sarah**, 39, placed her newborn son 15 years ago.

## 1 BEING CALLED “BIRTH MOTHER.” How do you think of yourself in the relationship—are you your child’s birth mother or simply mother?

**Margaret:** I think of myself as my daughter’s birth mom. I think of my daughter as my daughter, and of her adoptive mom as her mom.

**Courtney Chatterton:** I see myself as my daughter’s birth mother.

**Kathleen Nielsen:** I didn’t choose myself to take care of my son, but I am one of his moms; I did give birth to him. That is something no one else shares with him. So, yes, I am his birth mom. I don’t mind the term “birth mother,” especially when used by my son.

**Lisa:** Honestly, I prefer just “mom.” In the same respect, I prefer my daughter’s other

moms to be referred to as mom—not adoptive moms. I understand the need at times to clarify a situation, but at the end of the day, I am just a mom.

**Sarah:** I identify as a birth mother; I correct people who say “mother” because that’s not how I identify. I feel it’s totally valid for other women to use whatever term feels right to them. I do correct people who say “natural mother” or “real mother” because I think it’s wrong and hurtful.

**ADOPTIVE PARENT TAKEAWAY:** Whatever adjective you put in front of “mother,” unless you’re a single father, your child has two or more. Adoptive or birth, we both exist, we both have intrinsic value in our child’s life. The day-to-day interactions may differ, but, to borrow from Lisa, at the end of the day, we are all just moms—moms who love our kids.

## 2 COPING WITH THE PAIN. Does it ever get easier?

**Margaret:** I haven’t hit that turning point yet. I hope eventually there will be one, when I’ll finally have a week, and longer, of not crying over this. Working in a grocery store I see parents with their kids all the time. Some days, seeing a baby hurts, other days, it can make me happy. The one thing that affected me the most was when my sister visited with her daughter for a couple of days; parents set up a crib for the baby in my room.

**Courtney Chatterton:** There have been times when I’m visiting and my daughter is very upset. It breaks your heart having to leave on that note, feeling like there isn’t anything you could really do about it. Most of the time, I feel overwhelmingly proud to see her in the life that I wanted her to have.

**Kathleen Nielsen:** I don’t usually have many intense feelings after a phone call, but it’s hard

after visits. I feel all the feelings all at once. I miss him intensely and it's hard to get out of bed sometimes. It's almost like a hangover. Don't get me wrong, visits can be hard, but I cherish every moment of every one and would never give them up.

**Lisa:** It fluctuates. Adoption grief is sort of its own living, breathing entity. As my daughter grows and changes, so will my grief along with it. Some days, it's easy as pie and I'm overjoyed just to see her smile and to hear her toddler babble and laughter. Some days, when I see her, it's a reminder to me of all the moments in between visits I have to miss out on, and it crushes me. I don't think there really is a turning point.

**Sarah:** Thoughtless, casual remarks from well-intentioned people still get to me, even though I've experienced it for years. "It's every child's worst nightmare to be adopted," "Welfare mothers should be forced to give up their babies for adoption," "I would totally have a baby for my friends. It would be so easy."

**ADOPTIVE PARENT TAKEAWAY:** Adoption is hard. I mean, just look at your child—can you imagine not kissing her every day? There's nothing we need "to do," per se, other than having a deep awareness and understanding that there is no "moving on" from it. Adoption is an event, for all involved, that lasts a lifetime. Studies show that regular, ongoing contact and having their expectations met do a birth mom good, honor our contact agreements and use them as conversation starters to let the relationship evolve over time.

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### **3 CONTACT. Is there enough? Have you ever pulled back from the relationship? Have the adoptive parents?**

**Margaret:** Contact is mostly through phone calls and texts. I think we have a good amount

of contact right now. I do wish, though, that I didn't feel like I always have to ask.

**Courtney Chatterton:** We keep in touch with texts, e-mails, and visits. I usually see my daughter about once a month. I have babysat for her and her sister, and have been able to spend the day with her alone. I'm very happy with how things are now.

**Kathleen Nielsen:** I've pulled away, especially in the early years. It's hard and emotional, and so easy to shut down. Sometimes I wasn't even aware I was doing it, but eventually I'd realize, "Oh, instead of mailing that gift that's been sitting on my table for weeks, I'm ignoring it because birth day triggers are huge." Or, "Oh his mom e-mailed me, but I didn't respond right away, and now I'm embarrassed for having not responded." So, yes, I'm not proud of it, but I pulled away and had to work through my feelings. Then, get back in touch and work some more on my communication skills. Twelve years later, we have a very open relationship. There's no set schedule. Texting is probably our most used mode of contact. Phone calls and e-mail are good for longer things, Facebook for light things, and we see each other when we can.

**Lisa:** It became clear pretty quickly that our original agreement on four to six visits per year with picture updates wasn't enough for any of us—even though the agency told me that was "a lot." We've been seeing each other three to four times a month, not including those times when my parents and/or brothers might visit without me. We've gotten to the point where I also have one-on-one time with our daughter, sometimes even overnight.

**Sarah:** I went through an emotionally hard time and cut off contact with all friends and family, including the adoptive parents, for more than a year. It wasn't specific to the adoptive relationship, I just wasn't able to keep in touch with anyone. My main frustration about contact is that it has always been

up to me to reach out. When I do, the adoptive parents are open and welcoming, but have said things like they could never keep track of my phone number or e-mail. I don't think it's malicious, and I don't think they wanted me to go away, but it feels representative of the power dynamic that exists within an adoptive triad.

**ADOPTIVE PARENT TAKEAWAY:** Make it your responsibility to reach out to your child's birth mom. Even if you haven't heard from her in a while, even if you don't hear back from her, make the commitment to send a monthly text, e-mail, Facebook message, or leave a "thinking about you" phone message. If nothing else, you can rest assured that you're doing your part to keep the door open, letting her know that she's a welcome part of the relationship and your child's life.

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## 4 HAVING A VOICE. Do you feel you have a voice in the relationship?

**Margaret:** I don't feel I have much of a voice. It's what her mom wants. I mean, she lets me ask if I can see my daughter, but she has the final say. It's weird to think that, at one point, everything was on me. I had 100 percent control, and now I have so little. The only thing I can do to improve the situation is to talk more with the mom, and let time filter things out.

**Courtney Chatterton:** About a year after placing, contact became emotionally easier. We had finally built up a close, comfortable relationship with each other, and I began to feel better talking to them about things. I had met most of their family at that point and they welcomed me with open arms. I began to feel like it was more like hanging out with family than just my daughter and her adoptive family. They also became more involved in my life, coming to important events to support me.

**Kathleen Nielsen:** Having the adoption close was a real fear of mine up until two years ago. Any scheduling conflict, any lull in communication, sent me reeling with the thought that the adoption was closing and that I'd never see my son again. Watching other first moms deal with their adoptions closing only made the fear more real. During our tenth year, his mom and I broke through some communication barriers. I don't think the conversation started out differently than any of our others, but we happened to be in person this time and it was just the two of us, which gave us an opportunity for a much deeper heart-to-heart.

**Lisa:** I very much have a voice in this relationship, and a much greater one than I ever anticipated. I read a quote and the gist of it was—being a parent means allowing your heart to walk around outside of your body. This is scary enough, but imagine how much more terrifying it is to then place your heart in someone else's hands? I'm fairly certain all parents feel powerless to some degree, but this feeling is greatly increased if you're a birth parent. One wrong move, or simply due to the whims of another person, you could lose your heart entirely.

**Sarah:** When I placed, and even today, birth mothers can feel pretty powerless compared to adoptive parents. Now, as an adoptive parent, I realize that I didn't need to feel powerless as a birth mother, but I did, and I think others do too. Logically, I can see adoptive parents saying they are the powerless ones because the birth mother can change her mind during the first few months, but in reality birth mothers are scared, vulnerable, and feeling judged for who they are and what they choose.

**ADOPTIVE PARENT TAKEAWAY:** I think it's safe to say your child's birth mom is *scared*. Remind her that she is vital to the relationship and that what she says matters, that even if you disagree on something, it isn't

the end of the openness. In fact, being able to talk through differences will only make your relationship stronger.

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## **5 LIFE AFTER PLACEMENT.** Since placing your child, how has your life changed?

**Margaret:** I feel like I'm on a different playing field than most, like I have an added layer of complication. At the same time, everything is back to the way it was before I got pregnant. I always thought everything would change somehow, but that's not what happened.

**Courtney Chatterton:** My priorities in my life have changed. Even though I'm not in my daughter's life every day, I still want to set a good example for her. I have also found my faith during this journey. Three years ago, I never thought that would've happened. This whole process helped me grow up a lot. I learned to put other people before myself.

**Kathleen Nielsen:** It's been more than a decade, so a lot has changed. But I've been most influenced by relinquishment in my career path. I'm a social worker who specializes in pregnancy counseling and adoption, and now I'm working toward a Ph.D., in social work, with adoption as a research focus.

**Lisa:** The past few months I've let my life get too busy: long hours at work, reengaging in my social life, a few failed attempts at dating. My availability for face-to-face time with my daughter has been limited and my communication skills have surely slacked. I'm not personally happy with this, and I've been working to remedy it. I am half of this relationship. I have a 50 percent stake in its success and failure. I have to be as present as the adoptive parents are in order for it to work.

**Sarah:** When I got pregnant, I was lost and ungrounded. Since then I went to gradu-

ate school, built a career, got married, and adopted a fabulous daughter. It's not because of or in spite of the adoption—there's no way to know how my life would have been different had I not placed.

**ADOPTIVE PARENT TAKEAWAY:** Getting back to life's routines doesn't mean a birth mother has "gotten over" the adoption. Make an effort to connect with her to celebrate accomplishments or just hear how she's doing.

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## **6 PICTURE THE DAY.** Can you picture the day when you have a relationship with your child independent of his/her adoptive parents?

**Margaret:** I can't imagine it. Hopefully I can help guide her and be there for her on some issues she can't discuss with her mom. Right now, I'm just taking everything day by day.

**Courtney Chatterton:** I have already had a sample of what that might be like a few times, through babysitting and taking her to the zoo for the day. I love being able to see her just be herself; kids always act differently when their parents are around. When she is older, though, I hope that we have a laid back and open relationship with each other.

**Kathleen Nielsen:** As my son enters his teens, we're getting there, in bits and pieces. He spent a week with me and my husband last year. He's started using a couple of social media sites and has followed me on those. I write him letters directly and sometimes he'll even talk to me on the phone (he doesn't like the phone much). I still have a relationship with his parents, but it's also evolved. I no longer see his parents as gatekeepers.

**Lisa:** Oh, that's so far away! I'm the type of person who lives too much in the now to day-dream too far in the future.



**7 MISCONCEPTIONS.** There are a lot of misconceptions about birth mothers out there. What are some of the biggest you've run into?

**Margaret:** That we don't care about our children; that we are heartless. Some people think we are selfish and think we place our kids simply so we don't have to struggle.

**Sarah:** That day came this month! Until now, my relationship has always been with the adoptive parents. For the last several years, they haven't wanted me to have contact with my birth son and I have accepted their choice. After a lot of thinking, I decided it was important that he knew I was out there and I cared about him; anything he wanted to do from there was fine. I sent him a message on Facebook and, within five minutes, I got a message back. Little by little we're sharing more intimate things, although we're still very much at the 15-year-old-boy level. Last time I messaged him, I suggested he could come visit me if his parents said it was OK. We'll see what happens. It's definitely a new phase of our relationship and I'm glad I did it.

**ADOPTIVE PARENT TAKEAWAY:** Your child can and eventually will come to her own conclusions about her birth mother. My daughter might stay in contact with her birth family her whole life, or she might not keep the relationship going when she's an adult. Because it is her right to make that decision herself one day, not mine, I would never dream of not laying the groundwork for them to have an independent relationship. I'd hate to think that any of my actions either closed that door to my child or sent her off on that journey alone and unsupported.

It's really the opposite, though. It's the fact that we love our kids so much and we want to do what's best for them, even if it hurts us.

**Courtney Chatterton:** That we simply wanted the easy way out. If you think adoption is the easy way out, you are beyond wrong. I never sugarcoat it—it's the hardest thing I have ever gone through. You go through a grieving process that takes so much time and support. Basically, your child is gone but still there. It's very difficult to deal with.

**Kathleen Nielsen:** There are so many, but I think the three biggest misconceptions are that we're promiscuous, drug addicted, and stupid. No, wait—that you don't know any birth mothers. We are everywhere, in every walk of life.

**Lisa:** All of it. The mere fact that there's a birth mom stereotype in and of itself is ludicrous. We're not all the same. The only thing we, as a group, all have in common is that we became pregnant, decided we weren't capable of parenting that child at the time, and so chose to place our child for adoption. All the whos, hows, and whys are as varied as they could possibly get.

**Sarah:** Um, everything. We need a major me-

dia campaign. I guess age is my pet peeve—most people assume birth mothers are 16, and that’s pretty rare these days.

**ADOPTIVE PARENT TAKEAWAY:** Be an advocate for your child’s birth mom. Without sharing details about her story or reasons for placement, take it upon yourself to correct misperceptions you hear about birth mothers.

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## **8** HARD QUESTIONS. What will be the hardest question your child will ask you?

**Margaret:** Probably the classic ones people imagine. “Didn’t you love me?” “Why did you give me away?” Stuff like that.

**Courtney Chatterton:** Asking questions about her birth father and how we got to the point of adoption. It was not an easy road.

**Kathleen Nielsen:** I’ve spent the last 12 years preparing for any questions I could think of, so the hardest question will be the one I haven’t thought of.

**Lisa:** Any of the ones about her father. I don’t want my personal feelings towards him to influence her own. She has a right to make up her own mind about him, and the door’s been left open for him should he ever choose to have a relationship with her. I don’t want to taint that with my own feelings. But, I have no idea how to explain some of what happened between us and how that lead to my choosing adoption without it being biased.

**Sarah:** “Why didn’t you work harder to be my mother?” The question hurts me to the core when I think about it. Right now my response is: “There are some things you can’t overcome with hard work, and being a good mother to you was one of them; you deserved better.” I think the truth of it is that I wonder the same thing.

**ADOPTIVE PARENT TAKEAWAY:** Hard questions will inevitably come. I believe that it’s tremendously healing for our kids to ask their questions and get the answers from the person they want, and possibly need, to hear it from most of all.

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## **Supporting Each Other and Keeping Your Promises**

“Adoption is complex, and no two situations are alike,” says Sarah, who is not only a birth mom and an adoptive mom, but an adoptee. “I wish more of us could extend grace to others who are going through different adoption journeys and take a breath before we criticize the choices other people have made or are making. This goes for birth families, adoptive families, and adoptee families—we’re members of the same community, and together we could help each other heal. We also have a responsibility to teach the rest of the world about what adoption can look like, and people will be more likely to listen if we’re not coming from a place of constant judgment and scorn.”

Adoption professionals stress the importance of drafting an open adoption agreement, even in states where they’re not legally enforceable. Kathleen Nielsen, wearing her “MSW, doctoral student” hat, agrees—“No one should be left wondering what the guidelines are for your open adoption”—and takes it one step further: “After coming to an agreement and writing it down, stick to it. Even if things get crazy, do what you said you would. If your relationship evolves, feel free to do more, but always at least do what you said you would.” **AP**

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