

April Dinwoodie: Welcome to the NTDC Right-Time Podcast, Connections with Birth Families After Adoption. I'm your host, April Dinwoodie. This podcast works in conjunction with the classroom-based training, Connections With Birth Families After Adoption, providing an introduction to the materials that will be covered in the classroom. The podcast will also be a resource for parents to go back to as children in their home transition through different developmental stages.

In this episode we welcome Chris Fossey. Chris brings more than 30 years of varied professional experiences to her work. Chris has provided training in national and international settings and authored numerous articles. Chris has experience with adoptions through the Child Welfare system, private-domestic, and inter-country. Welcome, Chris. I'm so glad we are talking about an aspect of adoption that can be confusing and emotional for so many of us who experience adoption. Connections with birth families after adoption. When I say this, what does that mean and can you help us understand this concept?

Chris Fossey: Thank you, April. When a child's adopted and joins a new family, that adoption severs the legal ties to their birth family but it never severs the emotional ties and the connections they have, as well as the access to information that we know matters greatly and can impact a child's identity. As a result, it's critical for us not to think about if we maintain connections, but how we'll do it and how we consider varying degrees of contact and connection that works for both the adoptive family as well as the birth family. Now, this is individualized and depends on the circumstances of, and the individuals involved. And it's important to note, I think, that the level of connection and the amount of openness can change over time.

April Dinwoodie: That's so helpful, Chris. Can you help give us an example of a child that you've worked with or a family that you've worked with and talking about the importance of this connection?

Chris Fossey: There was a young couple that I worked with who placed their son with an adoptive family. They identified the family and they started to develop a relationship. But as the years went on, the dad really dropped out of the picture and the contact between the adoptive family and the birth family was really with just the birth mom. But as this young man both had things he wanted to celebrate and so share not only with his parents, but with his birth mom, he also had questions, especially about his birth father.

And when you think about a young man reaching puberty and starting to think about who he is, he had questions about his birth father that his adoptive family couldn't answer. And the birth mom was really able to fill in a lot of those details for him. And to this family's credit, they went further and made contact with extended family of this birth father. So they really could fill out that picture for this young man, who by that time his birth father had passed away, but they could still make the connection to answer. And that was so very important for that young man. This young man wanted to share things with all of his parents.

April Dinwoodie: Thanks, Chris. That is a really powerful example. One thing that always surprises me and we need to talk about is when a child has not been told of their adoption. Can you share your thoughts on the importance of adoptive families acknowledging and accepting that the child had a story before they moved to their home?

Chris Fossey: April, it's critical for adoptive parents to openly acknowledge the fact that a child had a family and a history before joining their family. Once parents acknowledge that their child has other parents, then there's no need for secrecy about adoption, especially toward the child, regardless of the type of adoption. It's important that connections to birth family are honored and respected and supported in ways that meet the needs of kids and meet them with openness and transparency. Children deserve to know their full story. It may need to be told to them over time as they grow older and have different levels of understanding, but it is their story. This topic is so personal to me, both as an adoptive mom, but also as an adoption professional.

April Dinwoodie: Chris, thank you so much for sharing and also your personal connection to this work is so valuable. So I appreciate that. Why do you think there is so much emphasis on maintaining ongoing communication and connection with birth families and adoption today?

Chris Fossey: Well, this attention we're paying to this subject is so necessary and so refreshing. We emphasize communication in developmentally appropriate ways because children have this right to information about themselves. We all want to understand our origins. We all want to understand our heritage. And so we want to make sure adopted children have that same right. And today, the majority of adoptions, regardless of the type, have some level of contact or relationship with the birth family. With the internet and so many opportunities for connecting, it's absolutely critical for us to realize some level of connection will likely take place, whether or not the adoptive family facilitates it. How much better to be part of the communication?

April Dinwoodie: That's so true. Can you give me some examples of how some families that you've worked with have maintained connections with birth families after adoption?

Chris Fossey: The beauty is every family finds what works for them. I've known families who have a very broad definition of family and they invite the birth family into the adoptive family. So it's one big family, all loving and supporting this child or these children. And they get together for holidays and birthdays and special occasions. And it's this great family. Sometimes adoptive families find a need to separate out that time to make it special. So they're meeting with the birth parents or the extended birth family, maybe the day before or a day after a holiday or at other times that are significant to their families. Sometimes they do this in their home. Sometimes they'll meet at a park or someplace where

getting together feels natural and allows people to move around and relax, send kids to run in place. So there's just a natural flow to things.

Other families that I've seen have used photo sharing apps, but when they have pictures, they put them out right away to share with each other. So they all stay up to date or sometimes it's by email or private Facebook pages. Families find lots of ways, but what we want to do is encourage them to find ways that work best for them and that they can maintain what they maintain connection, and honor the love they all have for this child.

April Dinwoodie: Those are such practical examples of the many ways that families can stay connected. I know people will appreciate hearing all those and maybe trying some new things that they haven't so far. So that's wonderful. Can you share an example of having access to information and how that has helped a young person in creating a strong identity by having access to this information and knowledge?

Chris Fossey: There's a young woman. I know who has a very open relationship with her birth family and all of her parents gather together and relate, not only in terms of the child, but as friends and family. But as this young girl got to adolescents and she was having some school struggles, some of the struggles she was having in school were the same things her birth mom had struggled with. And how helpful that was for her to say, "This is part of how my brain is wired." It was so much more comforting for her, but then she could also hear about what helped her birth mom to overcome some of those challenges, because we all have different academic gifts. And so it was helpful for her to make that connection.

April Dinwoodie: One thing I've learned that for some adoptive parents is that they may fear they have to compete for a child's love, trust, or for that child to view them as their parents. Have you found this as well? And how should adoptive parents navigate this.

Chris Fossey: April, these are absolutely normal fears. We all want to feel secure in our relationships. And sometimes adoptive parents can struggle with feeling entitled to parent this beautiful child that they love so much. Feeling concerned that a child may connect better with the birth parent is a natural concern. But if you stop and think about it on the flip side, parents can have multiple children and love them all for their unique characteristics. Likewise, children can love multiple parents and appreciate each of them for their role in their life.

April Dinwoodie: Thank you Chris. One thing that some adoptive parents think about and maybe curious about and even concerned about is whether or not an older child that has some connection to birth family will have trouble building attachments to their adoptive family if an ongoing relation with birth family continues. Does that make sense? And can you help us understand that additional layer of this work and making sure families are connected?

Chris Fossey: This is a really important question. We have to remember that attachment really builds from compounding experience of children having needs and having those needs met. And when adoptive parents are there day in and day out, and they're the parents who are raising the child and meet their needs repeatedly, whether it's physical or emotional care, that attachment grows. Kids are smart. They know the difference between their birth and adoptive parents, they know who's there with them every day and that's who they will connect to and build attachment to. That doesn't mean that there won't be an attachment and connection to birth family and that a child might not even try to use a relationship with birth families against their adoptive parents sometimes. But it does mean, and I think this is crucial, that birth and adoptive parents need to have a trusting relationship where they also communicate with each other and they don't let one to be played off the other. Just like children will play mom off dad sometimes. The good communication makes the difference.

The other thing, April, is it connections between adoptive and birth family can help the child understand that they don't have to choose one or the other, but it can be both. They don't have to choose between their birth and their adoptive parents and families. It's really the concept of expanding your family instead of replacing your family.

April Dinwoodie: Thank you so much, Chris, for that really important example and your message resonates so much. I always say it shouldn't be either or, it should be both and. And with that in mind, one of the critical factors to all of this is being able to talk about adoption and these extended family relationships and to communicate not just to the child, but to all the people that may be in this extended family and community. Can you help us understand some ways in which communication can be at a high level?

Chris Fossey: Well, to start, communication about adoption, acknowledging adoption and acknowledging the birth family and the connections that they have, that communication should be early and often. Children in blended families aren't confused about the roles and children in adoptive families aren't either. Hiding the relationship or denying it or just not talking about it really sets the stage for distrust later when kids eventually will find out. So using language that's age appropriate and beginning conversations as early as possible, even before a child fully understands, sets the stage for that transparency.

April Dinwoodie: Chris, finding the right language is often difficult for families when speaking about adoption and connecting to birth family. Can you help with some examples of appropriate language across age and stage and some language that has worked for you?

Chris Fossey: I think the most important thing April is making sure we're telling children their truth. For example, a small child will often want to know about when they were born. So making sure we tell them about when we went to the hospital to meet you after your birth mom had given birth to you. And talking about that, but

bringing the birth family into that story is so important. Kids will often say, "Why do I have blue eyes or brown eyes and your eyes are different?" Or, "Where did I get my musical or athletic ability?" When they ask those questions, that's again, a wonderful time to share their story and bring in the reality that they joined your family by adoption and there's another family that is very much a part of them.

April Dinwoodie: I think that's so important Chris, thank you for those examples. Let's shift gears just a little bit. When might it be appropriate to limit or prohibit communication or relationship with birth families?

Chris Fossey: When I think of openness and adoption April, I like to think of it in terms of relationship. And when we do that, there are relationships in our lives that maybe detrimental to us at certain points in time, or may just not be as close. Relationships with birth families are no different and they often change over time. Our belief and our hope is they grow. As parents, it's our job to protect our children. And if birth families are not in a good space, for example, if a contact is harmful to our child, then we have to set those boundaries. But it's also our responsibility to find ways to maintain connection, whether contact becomes emails or letters or photos, but maybe we scale back on the face-to-face contact for a time.

Another possibility is to find a family member, even if it's not the birth parent. And that family member, that grandparent or sibling, can also keep that connection for the child and ensure that he or she has access to information about their birth family. Also, as a child gets older, it's important that they have a voice in the decisions that are made. Some things may not be possible, but it's important that we listen to and see things from the child's viewpoint over time.

April Dinwoodie: I often say Chris, that even when birth parents may be having challenges, there is usually at least one extended family member that can be in connection with a child in an adoptive family. Now, what about those situations in which an individual doesn't know their birth family?

Chris Fossey: When the adoptive parent truly doesn't know, it's important that they support the child more than ever the child will need the support and guidance from their adoptive parent when they're trying to find that connection. There was a little guy I knew whose birth parents were unknown because of the circumstances of his relinquishment and adoption. But as they came back to us, we were able to fill in part of the story. And as we filled in the details, this little guy wanted to meet the foster mom that he had been with for a number of months. He went to her house, he was able to see the crib where he slept. He saw her pictures. She gave him that early part of his story and that mattered to him. So whatever we could tell him and whatever he could experience, it had to be honest, we had to admit that there were things we didn't know, and that we would help him try to find those answers as we could, but that this is the story that we

knew. And that was very comforting for him. All children have a right to their story, April.

If a parent has information that the adopted person doesn't, we need to share that. And when we wait for some magical age, it just becomes more difficult. Again, it has to be age appropriate, but waiting to tell kids, sets up the situation where they learn something later and wonders, "What else haven't I been told?" It erodes trust, it erodes confidence. Even parents who don't know should share that they don't know. So the existence and maybe future contact with a birth family isn't a secret.

April Dinwoodie: Chris, that's really been such an important message here throughout, is this idea of not having secrets and being very centered on the truth. So I appreciate that so much. Who do you think really keeps the communication alive and active? Is this birth family, adoptive family, both?

Chris Fossey: Well, we're talking about adults here. So everyone has responsibility to keep their commitments and also to be respectful of the other. Adoption creates the new family relationship. So it's often the control of communication that's shifted to the adoptive family. It can be their role to keep the communication active and to keep trying, even when a birth family may slow down or seemingly drop out of sight. My experience has been that a birth if parent hasn't forgotten their child, but there may be other things going on that are prohibiting or interfering with their ability to have contact. And so the adoptive family needs to continue to be open and embrace.

April Dinwoodie: Chris, thank you. Your messages resonate so, so much, and I know they will for the listeners as well. One last question before we close. Let's think about the individual who's adopted, how much say should they have in the relationship? And what if they don't want to maintain ongoing contact with birth family?

Chris Fossey: Ultimately, adoption is about the best interest of the child's. All parents need to be very attuned and attentive to the signals that we're getting from kids so that we make sure that communication is comfortable and is meeting the needs of that child. But the child's level of say in whether they maintain contact or not is not until they're well into adolescence.

April Dinwoodie: Well, that's the perfect way to close out this podcast. Chris, we thank you so much for your knowledge, your examples, and all of your information that you shared today with families.

Chris Fossey: Thank you, April. It's truly been my pleasure to have this conversation with you.

April Dinwoodie: Maintaining connections after adoption is essential and often an aspect of adoption today. With ongoing communication, parents, both birth and adoptive, can offer children an opportunity to know all the chapters of their life, which

ultimately aids in healthy identity development. Big thanks to our guest today, Chris Fossey.

The NTDC was funded by the Children's Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services under grant number 90CO1132. The contents of this podcast are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children's Bureau.