

April Dinwoodie: Welcome to the NTDC Podcast, The Importance of Connections to Birth Families. In this episode, we welcome Stephanie Davila, adopted person and birth mother to discuss just how important these connections are for adopted children. Stephanie's passion is to bring education and awareness to all areas of adoption through sharing her experiences. Stephanie is currently a stay-at-home mom, raising her two children. Welcome to the podcast, Stephanie.

Stephanie Davil...: So good to be here April. Thanks for having me.

April Dinwoodie: I can't wait to dive right into today's conversation about the importance of maintaining connections with birth family after an adoption. But before we do, I want to acknowledge that there are many different ways adoption takes place for children of all ages and regardless of adoption type. And even when there are complex circumstances and situations, it's vital to recognize the need for the opportunity to create connections to birth family in many different ways. Today, it's so meaningful to hear about Stephanie's experiences. She really is the perfect person to help us understand this topic because she has the unique experiences of both being an adopted person and a birth mother. So Stephanie, can you give us a brief overview of your connection to both?

Stephanie Davil...: Absolutely. I was domestically adopted at birth in 1990. I had a semi-open adoption, which means our only communication between my adoptive family and my birth family was through our adoption agency. At age 18 my birth father found me online and we started a Facebook relationship. I reached out to her through the agency at age 22 to reunify. And then at age 23, I met her and her parents and her children for the first time. And then as a birth mom, I made an adoption plan when I was 22. I wasn't ready to become a mom yet, so I found an adoption agency. We did six months of counseling leading up to placement. I explored every option possible before deciding on adoption. And actually, the birth father is my husband now. We got married a few years after placement and we have a beautiful open adoption with our son who is nine and a half.

April Dinwoodie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, Stephanie, I know how it can look so easy for those of us within the extended family of adoption to share our experiences. And you do that so matter-of-factly, but I also know that there's a lot of emotion that can come with it. So I'm so grateful for you for being here, for sharing. But I want to actually dig a little bit deeper here so that folks can really understand. Tell us a little bit about the growing up years and how you maintain connections to your birth family, and when you were small and growing up.

Stephanie Davil...: Right. I did not know much growing up. I knew my birth mother's name. I knew the age at which she had me and I knew she was married with two children. I did not really even have a medical history. I definitely did not have a genetic history or heritage. My mom would send birthday letters to her every year, telling her what happened in my past year of life. And my mom would send back letters and pictures and occasionally gifts, which my mom kept for me in a packet and I still have it. And she gave that to me when I was 18 years old.

April Dinwoodie: Wow. So again, this arc of all the things you talk about from being an adopted person to being a birth mother and you're growing up years and how that impacted you. I'm wondering, as you look back now, were there some things that your adoptive parents might have done to help create connections and relationships to your birth family?

Stephanie Davil...: I'm not sure there was much my parents could have done other than possibly giving me those letters sooner than they did. But they told me all the information that they had received from the agency. The agency had more information that they just did not share, but we talked about adoption all the time. And my mom specifically encouraged all of my questions and interest in my birth family and did the best that she could, answering all those questions. But the thing my mom did the best was, she spoke often of my birth mother and she expressed her love and gratitude towards my birth mother and tried to explain as best as she could, the reasons why my birth mother chose adoption.

Stephanie Davil...: I think my mom could have shared with me more about how sad my birth mother was and all of the grief that she was experiencing because she did not get to be my mom. I would've also loved to know my genetic heritage. We didn't have those spit tests in the nineties. So I really wish the agency hadn't kept that from my parents, since I have light skin and my parents have light skin, they were encouraged to just focus on their own personal family heritage, even though mine was different.

April Dinwoodie: There's so many intricate layers to this, and it sounds like it's a both-end circumstance, right? There were great things that your adoptive parents did. And then there were some things that they could have done better. And so it's important to think about those things and to think about how parents today can do more, right? To encourage these relationships and help children understand and build a healthy identity. So thank you so much for giving us more detail there. We're going to fast forward just a bit. And what I'm wondering now is how your experiences as an adopted person impacted your planning and decision-making related to your child and how you thought about the importance of keeping an ongoing relationship when you placed for adoption.

Stephanie Davil...: Well, adoption was always a positive in my household, so I didn't hold any stigmas or negativity associating with placing a child. The thing that was new to me was open adoption, which looking back is really the only way that I personally could have chosen adoption. I love how our son can get every question he has answered immediately. He doesn't have to wonder or imagine who we are, where he came from. And I don't have to wonder how he is doing and if I made the right decision. I can just log onto social media and see exactly how his day is going. The only person I had to encourage and support me were my adoptive parents. And that really just wasn't enough. I needed to hear from my birth family, that they loved me. That they thought about me and wanted to know me, that I was important to them and that they hadn't just chosen

adoption and then forgotten about me. And then obviously, my questions about my heritage went unanswered until I actually met my birth mom.

April Dinwoodie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). On the one hand, there's this ability to connect to the fact that they exist, but there's this deeper level of connection that you were looking for and hoping for. And it sounds like you've created that in your own adoption experience as a birth mom, tell us a little bit about how that comes to life practically every day, those connections day in and day out with your son and his family.

Stephanie Davil...: Well, before placement, we set up a thorough, rough idea of the kind of relationship that we wanted to have with them. And so we both filled out this very extensive packet. We all answered the same questions and that really made us compatible, that's actually how we chose them. So we had already agreed that we would have three or four visits a year. That's actually turned into more, as we've had more children and they're growing up, there's sporting events, and birthday parties, and holidays. And just fun little things here and there, like yesterday, we got to go to his baptism, which was just amazing. But during the pandemic, we obviously could not meet in person, so we used FaceTime to communicate. And then his mom is really good at sharing on social media, everything that he's doing every day. And so if I am curious or just scrolling, I get to see him and what he's up to.

Stephanie Davil...: And then if he has any questions, his mom will text us or email us. He's pretty shy, so he doesn't ask in person. But I know as he gets older his boundaries will change. Maybe he won't be so shy. Maybe he won't want to see us as much anymore. And so we have all decided that whatever relationship he wants with us, those are definitely boundaries that we're all going to respect. So that might mean he want to see us more than we've agreed to, or he might want to see us less than we've agreed to. And so we're just taking that day by day, year by year, and really just letting him decide the kind of relationship he wants. But on a daily basis, we don't really chat or necessarily even on a weekly basis, but that definitely varies by birth mom and adoptive family relationship.

April Dinwoodie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes, absolutely. It just sounds like you're modeling what it looks like to have a healthy relationship with grownups that are connected to your son, which is the best thing so that he can decide ultimately what makes sense for him. And you'll maintain the connections regardless of what he wants to do in times of ebbing and flowing of connectivity. So I think that's really, really critically important for folks to hear. And Stephanie, you mentioned earlier about your experience as an adopted person and what that was like for you. I'd love you to say more about the benefits of maintaining an ongoing relationship for everyone, but most specifically the child.

Stephanie Davil...: I think we can all agree that maintaining relationships among the whole triad is important. My relationship with my son's parents is just as important as my relationship with my son. I would say that we are a team and a family together,

just like you would want grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, best friends to pour into your child's life, a birth family provides a kind of relationship that's necessary and important in your child's growth. I think without that connection, they're really only left to their imagination. And our imagination is often inaccurate and deceptive. It's based on what we hope or dream in our state of mind or our place in life. And it's not based in reality, where a birth family provides a real heritage and a real love and a real support that an adoptive family just can't. I'm very thankful that our son will never have to daydream or imagine, he just has to ask me.

April Dinwoodie: Well, as an adoptive person, myself, Stephanie, that is a gift. And it's a really important point for any parent who is thinking about adoption, in the midst of adoption today. And with that in mind, given that the NTDC Training Curriculum is designed primarily to train adoptive parents, do you have any additional suggestions or advice for prospective adoptive parents who might be listening or parents who are parenting right now to think about and consider as they think about, and as they move through the possibility of maintaining connections to birth family.

Stephanie Davil...: I think I would just want them to ask themselves a few questions like is your marriage ready for adoption? Are you choosing adoption solely to grow your family? Are you willing to put in extra work and stay educated on adoption for the rest of your life? Are you capable of loving and prioritizing the birth family? Do you understand why fighting for birth family relationships is so important? And lastly, a pretty difficult question to answer, do you view these children as a commodity that will fulfill your own self-interests? I think if you can dive deep and answer all these questions thoughtfully and truthfully, you'll have a much better picture of the kind of adoptive parent you'll be. I think it's important to challenge yourself and always be in pursuit of adoption education from birth families and especially adult adoptees, so that you can fully understand what your adopted child is or will be experiencing.

April Dinwoodie: Stephanie, thank you so much for giving us a real example of how you are building a relationship with your son's adoptive parents and modeling for him, what it looks like to have that healthy relationship. This way he can create the relationships he wants on his terms. Can't think of a better way to end this podcast. It's been so great to have you, Stephanie. Thank you so very much.

Stephanie Davil...: Thank you so much, April for having me.

April Dinwoodie: It's always so inspiring to hear directly from members of the extended family of adoption, as they share experiences to help enlighten parents. Today, we know that regardless of adoption type it's healthy and important for children to maintain connection to their birth families in some way. We also know that it's really up to the adoptive parents to encourage and build these relationships with birth family and that creating and nurturing these relationships is possible. The NTDC was funded by the Children's Bureau Administration and Children,

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