

The Role of the Pediatrician in Adoption with Reference to 'The Right to Know': An Update

The adoption process in our country traditionally has been designed to safeguard the rights of the adoptive parents, ensure the solidarity of the adoptive family, and preserve the anonymity of the birth parents. When adoption is finalized, the original birth certificate is "sealed" and a new certificate is issued in the name of the adoptive parents. Once sealed, the laws of most states specify that the original record can be opened only by court order and for "just cause." A few states have provisions for opening of the records on demand of the adoptees when they become adults. This provision frequently is true in theory but not in practice, and the definition of "just cause" has varied considerably from court to court.

Most adoptive parents have warm and loving relationships with their adoptive children. Most try to pass on to them, at appropriate times, as much of the birth information as they know and are able to provide. Most adoptees have a warm and loving and truly bonded relationship with their adoptive parents. In spite of this, and regardless of their attachment to the adoptive parents, some adoptees have a compelling desire and/or need to learn of their birth parent or parents.

Many adult adoptees and adoption specialists see this search as essential to the establishment of a sense of identity. Most reports of reunions indicate that adoptees have been pleased with the meeting and that their ties to their adoptive parents have been strengthened thereby. In addition, there is the growing body of law that has spoken to the right of people to know the content of various personal records.

The Child Welfare League of America has reviewed data from 163 adoption agencies and found that more than 3,000 adult adoptees returned to these agencies in 1975. Two fifths of these persons wished to learn the identity of or locate their birth

family. Three fifths desired identifying information only. In increasing numbers, mature adoptees have approached courts and adoption agencies to seek information regarding their birth parents' identity. Adult adoptees have founded groups to provide mutual support for searching and encountering birth parents. Some groups (such as the Adoptees Liberty Movement Association) have opened branches across the country in an effort to repeal sealed-records laws and to help adoptees find their birth records and/or parents.

The Committee recognizes the strong feelings and arguments supporting each side of this multifaceted problem; however, options should be carefully explored and frequently adjusted to meet the needs of each adoptee-adoptive parents-natural parent complex. If an adult adoptee requests information, the Committee suggests an orderly exploration with that person by an adoption counselor to find out what the adoptee really wants to know and how his or her needs can best be satisfied; it is particularly important to preserve the feelings and rights of the adoptive and biologic parents.

Mature adoptees should have access to their birth records. Scotland, Finland, and Israel have allowed adult adoptees access to their birth records for many years. In Britain, The Children's Act of 1975 provided for a relatively simple process whereby mature adoptees could obtain the name and occupation of their birth mother (and possibly the father) following compulsory counseling by a social worker. Evaluation of these experiences discloses that a relatively small number of adoptees attempted to see their birth records; a considerably smaller number of adoptees actually traced their birth parents. Studies of reunions of adoptees and their birth parents in these countries, as well as in the United States,¹ show that frequently the adoptee developed a greater sense of identity, the relationship between the adoptee and the adoptive parents was improved, and the birth parents ended their deep concern about the welfare of the child they relinquished. The degree of satisfaction obtained usually depended on the nature of the initial

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psychologic need for the search. Frequently, the end of the search actually occurred in discovering the details of the past rather than in an actual reunion.

The pediatrician is in a unique position to assume the role of the child's advocate as he or she matures. The pediatrician may serve as a clearinghouse for information, such as birth and adoption history. The pediatrician may advise parents and potential adoptive parents about anticipated problems, particularly the possibility that their adoptive child may later want to learn his or her biologic identity, and that their cooperation in this effort may improve rather than break down the relationship with their adoptive child.

The pediatrician should encourage the adoptive parents to obtain as much medical and background history of the birth parents as possible at the time of adoption. Many present-day adoptions are private rather than through agencies. The involved physicians and attorneys must help compile a complete summary of the medical history of *both* birth parents and their families. This complete information is required to enable the adoptive parents to provide essential answers as the maturing adoptee inquires about his or her background.

Later, open access to information and the possibility that the mature adoptee will consider contact with his birth parents could create a more wholesome environment for both parents and child. The more open the communication concerning all adoption-related matters, the less likely will be identity problems for the adoptee.

The pediatrician should counsel and advise patients who are adoptees to better understand their feelings and problems; background information

should be provided at appropriate times. The pediatrician should also educate the community, the courts, and agencies on the changing emphasis in adoptive practices, especially in the area of "the right to know."

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