



*What you should*

**KNOW**

*if you're considering*

**adoption**

*for your baby*

# Get the facts.



*Far too many birthmothers look back on their adoption experience and say, "If only I had known." This brochure is provided in the hopes that you will be able to learn from women who have already placed their children for adoption, who are living with the results of that decision, and who aren't afraid to talk about the often painful realities of life as a birthmother.*

**B**ecause those of us in a crisis pregnancy are faced with stress, fear and loss, we're naturally prone to denial. That's one thing that makes thinking clearly about adoption so tricky. Another is that it's very hard to accurately imagine what adoption will be like. You really don't know until you've done it—and in many states, once you give your right to parent to someone else, there is no turning back. We at Concerned United Birthparents feel it's the duty of every birthparent to share what we wish we had known when we were considering adoption.

The words that follow are not intended to be anti-adoption. The fact is that adoption might well be the best plan for you and your child—but in order to be a truly good thing, it needs to be a well-considered decision, made at least twice—once before the birth, once after. Your decision will not be fully informed

unless you hear the negative aspects of adoption as well as the positive. Following are the most common regrets birthparents have voiced.

**1. "I wish I had known that family preservation should come first."** Most experts on adoption agree that if a child can stay in his first family, he should. Family separation is traumatic for everyone involved, and if there is a way to keep the mother and child together, it should be found. Single parenthood is *not* inherently bad. Some people make excellent single parents, while others don't yet have the necessary skills.

Adoption is a permanent solution to an often temporary problem. For instance, consider how you will feel if you relinquish due to money reasons, and six months down the road, you have a

**Don't apply a permanent solution to a temporary problem.**



good job that pays well. Or how you'll feel if you relinquish due to lack of family support, and the same people who did not want to help you raise your child are now saying, "We wish you'd kept the baby. We could have helped you." (Family members who are unhappy about your unplanned pregnancy will often do the most amazing turnaround once they meet the newborn baby.) Ask yourself why you're questioning your ability to parent: is it the opinions of others or your own deepest beliefs? Try to separate which of your problems are time-limited from those that seem here to stay. Some problems are insurmountable and may mean adoption is the answer, while others can be fixed if you know where to turn. Explore every alternative before considering adoption.

**2. "I wish I had known the extent to which adopted children deal with issues of abandonment."** Many adopted people, especially those in closed adoptions, report feeling

abandoned by their birthmothers. While adoptees may be glad to have been adopted, they are not happy to have been relinquished. (In other words, they see their adoption as two separate events: being given up and being taken in.) It's very hard to accept that the most painful choice you make for your child might not be appreciated by them. There are no guarantees your child will like what you've done. Can you live with that? Don't fall into the "martyr" mindset that you are doing something beautiful and noble for your child—you might be disappointed if the eventual adult doesn't see it that way.



**3. "I wish I had known that I wasn't carrying my child for someone else, and that it wasn't my responsibility to help the infertile couples of the world."** Ideally, adoption is supposed to be about giving a child a family, not giving a family a child, but sometimes that truth gets lost.

As a pregnant woman in a crisis situation, odds are you desperately want to make things better. You may be under enormous pressure, experiencing disapproval or shame. It's natural that you will want to "fix" things and earn approval once more, but it shouldn't be done by trying to make a prospective

**Don't concentrate on the prospective adoptive parents' hopes and needs. This is between you and your baby.**



adoptive couples' dreams come true.

It can be emotionally wrenching to look through the profiles of hundreds of waiting couples, all of whom seem so "deserving" of parenthood when you aren't even sure if you are. You begin to feel sad for each of them. You start to see yourself as the one who can provide them with their most cherished desire. Furthermore, if your friends and family are not being supportive, the hopeful adoptive

parents might be the only ones who are kind to you during your crisis. You may find yourself wanting to please them.

This is a mistake. *No matter how much you like the pre-adoptive parents, you must not put their feelings first.* Their hopes and dreams exist independently of you and your baby. If you entrust your baby to them in order to make them happy, you've chosen adoption for all the wrong reasons. If you decide to parent, they may be heartbroken, but they can always go on to find another child. It is not your responsibility to "fix" someone else's childlessness. The only people who should count in your decision are you and your child. In the words of birthmother Shannon Basore, "I can't fully feel that I did what was best for my child, because my focus at the time was providing this childless couple with a child of their own. And my grown child is angry about that."

**4. "I wish I had known that society dislikes and fears birthparents."** Americans have extremely unrealistic views of birthparents, painting us as either sinners or saints. Among the general public, a woman considering adoption is applauded as being admirably unselfish in putting the needs of her child first. But once the mother actually surrenders her child, she is looked down upon. After all, "who could give away their own flesh and blood?"

As adoption author Jim Gritter has noted, nothing can prepare you for the plummet in your stock you will notice once you move from potential birthmother to birthmother. Often the very same people who said you were making a terrific, noble sacrifice while you were pregnant might now call you a heartless



**Don't expect empathy.**

abandoner. What's even worse is that you confront this mental whiplash at a time when you are most vulnerable: grieving heavily, full of post-partum hormones, feeling completely alone in the world.

People in general don't understand the role of birthmother, and even birthmoms in the healthiest of open adoptions, who feel they made a great choice for their child, are sometimes unable to

talk about it without experiencing judgement. Those uneducated about adoption issues tend to avert their eyes when you try to speak of your child, or whisper behind your back, saying hurtful things like, “I could never give my baby away.”

Part of the reason the world fears birthmothers so much is that we show that the mother-child bond can be broken, at least outwardly and temporarily. If you choose to place your child for adoption, get prepared for a lifetime of being misunderstood by many and feared by others.

**5. “I wish I had known the ways in which agency adoptions may be safer than private adoptions.”** Lawyers aren’t trained in human services, and they really don’t have any business orchestrating the personal side of something so fraught with lifelong psychological issues as an adoption. Let them stick to the paperwork. Do not do a private adoption unless you have no choice, i.e., there are absolutely no reputable agencies in your area. If you must go private, take full control. Make sure you have your very own lawyer who is



### Know the pitfalls of private adoption.

working for you and only for you.

Well-run agencies offer post-adoption support services for all triad members, including mediation should your open adoption relationship start to go wrong. These services are invaluable, and you will most likely need them. There are well-run agencies and there are poorly-run agencies. Talk to birthmothers about what agencies they recommend and which ones they say to avoid. And never, never choose your child’s adoptive parents from the Internet.

**6. “I wish I had known that professionals who say they are there to help you are in actuality serving the real client, the prospective adoptive parent.”** We’ve just said that agencies

are preferable to lawyers or facilitators, but please don’t go to an adoption agency or a pregnancy counselor expecting that they will have only your best interest in mind. They do not, and they cannot. Adoption agencies, like it or not, have to make money to operate. The paying client is the adoptive parent, so services are usually geared toward them.



### Be realistic about what adoption agencies do.

Think about the conflict of interest that occurs when an agency is counselling you on whether or not to place your baby. It’s the rare agency that can tell a woman, “Adoption doesn’t sound like the best choice for you” when they have waiting lists of hopeful adoptive parents that are seven years long or more. As a result, many agencies are in the business of finding babies for homes instead of homes for babies. Be aware of this.

Agencies aren’t the only ones with agendas. “I released my daughter believing that letting her go was the noble, selfless, mature thing to do,” says birthmother Terri Smith. “This was reinforced and validated over and over by a swarm of older women I barely knew from the church I attended at the time. They were all willing to point me toward adoption resources, but nobody pointed me toward parenting resources. Within three months of the adoption, the flock of women who had come to be my ‘friends’ while I was pregnant disappeared from my life. I have not heard from them since. When it was time to grieve, they were not there.”

During the time of your decision-making, you need unbiased advice from someone who is not a stakeholder in the outcome. If you’re working with an agency, insist they give you a referral for independent counselling to help you explore your non-adoption alternatives. If you’re on your own, free pregnancy counselling is sometimes available through crisis pregnancy centers (but be aware—the center could be affiliated with an adoption agency or a religious group.) Either way, if you can afford to see a therapist on your own, do it. Look for one skilled in adoption issues. If you cannot afford to see a therapist, use the internet to get in touch

with birthmothers who are actually living with adoption, and who can tell you honestly what it is like. Don't rely solely on birthmothers who speak on behalf of agencies for all your information.

Sometimes these women are stuck in denial and will only tell you about the happy side of adoption because they haven't yet faced their grief. Get the full range of viewpoints, happy and sad.

**7. "I wish I had known that numerous internet resources exist for birthmothers and women in crisis pregnancies to find each other and talk."** It's crucial to hear from all kinds of women

who have gone before you. Next to reading books about adoption and looking into parenting resources, the single best thing you can be doing right now is talking

**Do your research.**

to birthmothers who are actually living the experience. (The next most important thing is talking to adult adoptees. Unfortunately,

many potential birthparents do neither, talking only to prospective adoptive parents.) The Internet is the easiest, fastest way to find people who are living adoption. At the end of this pamphlet are listed some addresses that can get you started. Use them!



**8. "I wish I had known the difference between a truly open adoption and a semi-open one."** Too many people have fallen for the lie that open adoption only means pictures and letters once a year.

They're never told that open adoption is about relationships, and ongoing, reciprocal contact between birth and adoptive families. Or they might know what open adoption is, but aren't sure that they *should* see their child, so they don't ask for contact up front. And then they wind up with the kind of adoptive parents who either reject them or who merely tolerate their presence instead of welcoming them and appreciating them.

This is a situation nearly impossible to correct down the road.

It's very common to want more contact after the placement than you



thought you'd want before. (For example, adoptees want and need to know their siblings. If and when you have more children, will the adoptive parents be ready to allow the relationship?) We can't

**Ask for the maximum.**

stress it enough: give yourself an insurance policy by asking for more

contact and openness than you think you'll want. If you don't ask up front, you'll probably never obtain the kind of relationship that open adoption needs.

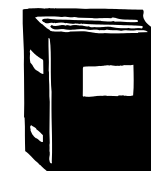
Don't forget: the balance of power shifts after the adoption, at which time the prospective parents who have been courting you are now under no obligation to do anything for you at all. Interview prospective parents long and hard about their commitment to openness. When all the adults involved work together, open adoption is extremely positive for the child. Make sure the couples you're considering "get it." Assess whether they truly desire an open adoption relationship or are merely willing to participate. There is a crucial difference.

**9. "I wish I had known that in most states, open adoption agreements are not legally enforceable."** Many women choose adoption based on the promise of openness, only to have their trust violated when the adoptive parents become fearful and begin breaking their promises. That kind of betrayal can be devastating.

It's like losing your child twice. Some birthmothers have even committed suicide in the wake of such treachery. That's why it is vitally important to know that you have little or no protection. In all but a handful of states, there is nothing holding adoptive parents to anything that they say prior to the adoption.

**Know the laws.**

There are many variations of betrayal in open adoption, depending upon the level of openness that was initially agreed upon. Sometimes the adoptive parents stop sending the promised pictures. Sometimes they go so far as to change their names and move to another state. What typically happens is an end to the promised visits. The excruciating grief







you'll feel after a disappointment like that is inexplicable. Don't risk it—choose parents that are truly committed to a lifelong, two-way relationship built on openness.

Make sure you're committed, too. You as a birthparent can also betray the adoptive parents' trust if you say you will be in contact with the child and later decide to drop out of sight. Genuine open adoption is done for the

sake of the child—it's a responsibility, not a privilege. Remember, you are vital in the life of your child *no matter what*, even if you are no longer parenting.

Regardless of what level of openness you've negotiated, remember, when you surrender your right to parent your child, you become a legal stranger. You'll have as much claim to your baby as any person walking down the street— that is, none.

**10. "I wish I had known there was no need to rush my decision; that it could have waited until after the birth."**

In some states, you have a small amount of time after the birth to change your mind. But in many more, irrevocable consents can be signed immediately after delivery, right in the hospital bed! Fearful pre-adoptive parents tend to like this type of arrangement because they're virtually guaranteed a baby when birthparents are rushed

**Don't rush it.**



into signing without a chance to process *all* of the information. The laws in these "adoption mill" states are highly unethical, but they flourish nonetheless.

"Drive-through" relinquishments show that our society does not respect the awareness of a newborn baby. We pretend that if the switch-off is executed quickly enough, the baby will never know what happened. Pre- and perinatal psychologists tell us, however, that this is not true. Your baby knows what's going on. Conduct yourself knowing that your child is watching you, and move slowly and thoughtfully. Revisit your decisions at every turn.

There is no hurry. Even if your initial decision is adoption,

you need to rethink it in the light of your baby's actual presence. As birthmother Heather Lowe notes, "Much of my adoption decision was based on denial—not knowing how I'd feel about the child of a man I did not love, not knowing if I had the instinct for motherhood. All those worries vanished in the moments after his birth, but then it was too late. Everyone thought I had 'committed' myself, and my state's laws made sure there was no going back."

**Leave yourself an out.**

Heather made the mistake of thinking of herself as a birthmother while she was still pregnant. "I took on the identity of a birthmother prematurely. Simply considering adoption doesn't make you an instant birthmother. Pregnancy is parenting, and during that time, you are a mother, plain and simple. Don't emotionally detach, because if you don't mother your child in your womb, who will?"

Birthmother Brenda Romanchik adds, "The advice expectant parents sometimes get from unethical agencies to 'detach' from their baby is completely ridiculous. After all, you can't get more attached than an umbilical cord."

Give it time. You will know more, in the days after meeting your child, about whether you have the parenting qualities you want for your child. If your decision to place your baby is based only on doubts and fears, rather than on cold hard facts like chronic addiction, homelessness, or a total inability to provide, then you will most likely have a change of heart. (This is why having the prospective adoptive parents in the delivery room can be such a bad idea; they make it next to impossible to change your mind.) Give yourself the freedom to savor your motherhood.



Finally, *never* sign papers in the hospital. Your state may allow it, but it isn't required, so do not do it. Adoption is a serious matter, one that should be finalized only in a courtroom or a legal environment, not a recovery bed. Take your baby home from the hospital. Give parenting a one or two week try, so that you know for sure what it feels like and whether it is something you can manage or not. Or consider a foster-adopt period in which you'll have time to

## Try parenting first.

feel the separation but will maintain your legal rights to parent. If you decide to surrender your parental rights, you may feel more at peace knowing exactly what it is that you gave up.

Giving birth is truly a rite of passage. You become a mother, and you are never “not a mother” again. That’s why so many women who have considered adoption change their minds after the birth. Because you aren’t the same person after giving life, the experience in itself is information to be considered in your decision.

**11. “I wish I had known how much I was going to love my child.”** Predicting the strength of mother-love can be quite a difficult thing to do, especially for first-time mothers. Many new mothers express surprise at the overwhelming nature of the feeling—especially those who were encouraged to “disconnect” and “detach” from their baby in the womb, or who had troubled or non-existent relationships with the birthfather. Even mothers by rape can feel great love for their babies.

The feelings will take you by surprise. “I never imagined that I would miss or love my son as much as I do,” says birthmother Su Parker. “I continue to wonder if I will ever find a complete healing in this,” says Jennifer Maynard, also a birthmother. “It’s almost like adoption is so *big* that you can only grasp little pieces at different times. But one thing I have no problem understanding is that I miss my son far more than I ever imagined.”



Love grows much bigger after the birth.

**12. “I wish I had known that the pain of adoption never goes away.”** You can certainly live a happy and productive life after a relinquishment, but there will always be a hole in your heart and soul. The hole can’t really be filled. You just learn to live with it.

“As a birthfather I’ve learned to live with a lot of pain and regret,” says Steve Davis. “Adoption isn’t something that just

happens and then you go on with your life. It’s permanent, and it affects your life forever.”

Placing your child for adoption profoundly and irreversibly changes your life. Subsequent children cannot replace the lost child and will not take away the pain. (In fact, many birthparents may intensely revisit their grief during subsequent pregnancies and/or birth experiences.) Family members rarely understand your losses, even though they’re suffering too. Birthparents often feel very alone, and true communication with others can become quite difficult.

## Expect pain.



After the first years, the grief is not static; while never fully disappearing, it does ebb and flow. Certain times, like holidays and anniversaries, are worse than others. Often joy and sorrow are mixed: in an open adoption, each new milestone in your child’s life can bring fresh pain on top of the pride, while in a closed adoption, reunions can sometimes bring new wounds in addition to healing the old ones.

**13. “I wish I had known that the effects of adoption are so far-reaching.”** Let’s look at the subsequent losses you might not have considered: Your parents will lose a grandchild. You may lose your relationship with your own grandchildren. Your nieces and nephews may have tough questions about why their cousin isn’t with the family. Your subsequent children might fear that they will be given away. For medical or psychological reasons, you could suffer secondary infertility and never be able to have another child.



## Count up the losses.

(Some studies suggest that secondary infertility among birthmothers can be as high as 40%.) You might lose your faith in intimate relationships, making it harder for you to trust and to love. Many of those you thought were your friends may judge and scorn you for your decision. Depression and grief could derail your productivity and your advancement in school or career.

These are just a few examples. Consider all the potential losses, not just the loss of your child.

14. *“I wish I had known that in putting my baby first, I didn’t have to put myself last.”* It’s natural to want what is best for your baby, but that doesn’t necessarily mean what’s best is to be apart from you. Do not discount your importance to your child.

Experts view the new mother and baby as a “dyad,” that is, a single organism built of two people. Newborn humans emerge from the womb much earlier in their physical development than do many animals, and they aren’t able to survive on their own. A baby’s instinct is to look for and depend on its mother, who is known by her smell and her voice. So for the early months at least, what is good for you is good for your baby. As long as you are not abusive or neglectful, your baby *wants* to be with you.



### Refuse to sell yourself short.

Don’t let any negativity about your “stupidity” or “carelessness” in getting pregnant affect your self-esteem and cause you to relinquish simply because you think you aren’t good enough. And don’t assume that a big house or wedding bands on the prospective adoptive couple’s fingers will make them better parents than you. Just ask the birthmothers who have been let down by adoptive parents who divorce, experience various other human failings, or in the most horrible cases, abuse or harm the children.

There are no easy answers in a crisis pregnancy, and often the path isn’t clear. Even so, you owe it to yourself and to your child to find the best possible solution for both of you. “It was the best thing I could have done for my child, and the worst thing I could have done for myself,” says birthmother Andie Lewis. A happier outcome would have been to find a solution that was good for both of them. Try to find a plan that helps both you and your baby. You’re both worth it.

## Conclusion

Nothing can prepare you for what it feels like to leave the hospital empty-handed, milk running, crying like you will never stop. Do not underestimate what is in store for you should you choose adoption. Perhaps the most important point is this: Never say “That won’t be me.” Don’t assume you will feel any differently from the birthparents who have gone before you. Trust the women who are living it now to describe what it will be like for you.

We hope this information has helped you to understand what it feels like to be a birthparent. As you journey through your decision-making process, keep reading, and keep educating yourself until after the birth and beyond.



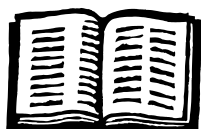
Most importantly, demand respect at every stage. If you encounter anyone (doctors, nurses, social workers, prospective adoptive parents) who doesn’t treat you like the expectant parent that you are, or who doesn’t understand that considering adoption is a parental decision over which you have full control, end the relationship immediately and find a new provider. This is the most important decision you’ll ever make. Consider it carefully.

## About the author



Heather Lowe was 27 when she gave birth to her son. A writer in the field of public relations, Lowe holds an honors degree in broadcast journalism from the University of South Carolina. Since the loss of her son, she has become active in adoption reform. Her other interests include languages, foreign travel, reading, horseback riding, animal rescue, and spending time with her three dogs.





## For Further Reading

### On Birthmothers

*Birthmothers*, Merry Bloch-Jones  
*The Other Mother*, Carol Schaefer  
*Pregnant? Adoption is an Option*, Jeanne Warren Lindsay

### On Adoptees

*The Primal Wound*, Nancy Newton Verrier  
*Ithaka*, Sarah Saffian  
*Journey of the Adopted Self*, B.J. Lifton

### On The Adoption Triad

*The Family of Adoption*, Joyce Pavao  
*May the Circle Be Unbroken*, Lynn Franklin

### On Open Adoption

*The Open Adoption Experience*, Sharon Kaplan Roszia and Lois Melina  
*Children of Open Adoption*, Kathleen Silber and Patricia Dornier  
*The Spirit of Open Adoption*, Jim Gritter  
*Open Adoption Pocket Guide Series*, Brenda Romanchik

### On Prenatal Awareness

*The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, Dr. Thomas Verny

### On Grief and Crisis

*Living Through Personal Crisis*, Anne Kaiser Sterns  
*Good Grief*, Granger Westberg  
*Ambiguous Loss*, Pauline Boss

### On Single Parenting

*Operating Instructions*, Anne Lamott  
*The Single Mother's Survival Guide*, Patrice Karst  
*The Complete Single Mother*, Andrea Engber, Leah Klungness

### General Adoption Works

*A Ghost at Heart's Edge*, Susan Ito and Tina Cervin, editors  
*The Dark Side of Adoption*, Mirah Riben

## Internet Resources

### ABOUT ADOPTION

A quick way to find just about anything you're looking for regarding adoption and parenting resources. With message boards, too.

<http://adoption.about.com/parenting/adoption/>

### AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF OPEN ADOPTION AGENCIES

69% of today's adoptions have some level of openness, but what is a true open adoption? Investigate it further at this site, which also tells you why parenting your own child should be your first option.

<http://www.openadoption.org/>

### BIRTH PSYCHOLOGY

Understanding the feelings between you and your child at birth.

<http://www.birthpsychology.com/birthscene/adoption.html>

### CONCERNED UNITED BIRTHPARENTS

Includes links to many birthparent support pages on the web.

<http://www.cubirthparents.org>

### EFFECTS OF ADOPTION ON THE BIRTHMOTHER

This thesis is centered on closed adoption birthmothers, but much of it applies to open adoption birthmothers as well.

<http://home.att.net/~judy.kelly/thesis.htm>

### INSIGHT: OPEN ADOPTION RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

An organization offering resources and support for all triad members in open adoptions.

<http://www.openadoptioninsight.org>

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