

# Adoptive Families

*"What a difference it makes to come home to a child"*

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## Birthfathers Rising

**For years, the presence of birthfathers in adoption has been almost nil. But change is coming.**

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When Cody Davis visits the DeBoer family in Portland, Oregon, he often ends up roughhousing with 10-year-old Mitchell DeBoer —much as an older brother might. But Davis isn't Mitchell's brother. He's his birthfather. He is also a rarity: a 30-year-old man who maintains a relationship with the child he placed in an open adoption years before. "A lot of young guys just run when their young girlfriends say they're pregnant," says Davis, who visits Mitchell several times a year. "But I stayed and got involved. I just felt I was doing the right thing at the right time."



Committed birthfathers like Davis are few and far between. At Catholic Charities, a social services organization in Portland, fewer than 20 percent of birthfathers stay involved, says Paula Lang, adoption program manager. Although a sense of responsibility often determines whether or not a man will remain an involved birthfather, there are other forces at play.

### ***Where Have All the Fathers Gone?***

Over the past two decades, closed adoption records have been unsealed, transracial adoptions have become common, and open adoptions have become the norm. All things considered, birthfathers may be the last taboo in the American adoption process. The literature on birthfathers is virtually nonexistent—only one book has been written on the subject: *Out of the Shadows; Birthfathers' Stories* (1995) by writer Mary Martin Mason, an adoptive parent who herself was adopted and who knew her birthfather growing up.

"We always put the birthmother's needs first, even if that's not right," says Lang. Although Catholic Charities offers a support group for birthmothers, nothing equivalent exists for birthfathers. One reason for birthfathers' absence from the adoption process may be that a birthmother may not want the father to participate in the child's life. And there are negative expectations about birthfathers. "The resounding message society sends them is shame and failure," says Shari Levine, executive director of Open Adoption and Family Services, a Portland agency that placed Mitchell with the DeBoers. "If you have a birthfather—or birthmother—who is not involved, it's probably because of shame."

### ***Tearing Down Walls***

In an attempt to change things, Open Adoption and Family Services has recently launched an initiative to encourage men to participate in open adoptions. One goal is to understand the birthfather's unique experience. Another is to document the advantages birthfathers bring to an open adoption. "It's huge for the child to have the birthfather involved," says Levine. "It puts all the pieces together."

Anecdotal evidence reveals the depth of feeling birthfathers experience when placing their child with an adoptive family. Their stories suggest that involved birthfathers have several traits in common: a sense of responsibility, comfort level with their status as birthfathers, and an understanding of the important role they play in a child's adoption experience.

“Having her birthfather involved will help my daughter in the long run, with her identity and with the knowledge that she was deeply cared for,” says Alan Hotchkiss of Portland, who adopted his one-year-old daughter, Laura, a year ago. “It’s a blessing to have Warren’s commitment.” Hotchkiss is speaking of Laura’s birthfather, Warren Jones\*, a 26-year-old limousine driver from Beaverton, Oregon. “I love that little girl more than life itself,” says Jones. “There’s never been any question about me caring for her.” When Laura’s birthmother became pregnant, she and Jones were on the verge of breaking up, he explains. “Placing her for adoption gave Laura the potential for security and love.”

Jones has seen Laura several times in the past year, including holidays, birthday parties, and drop-in visits. Being involved with his daughter’s family has a practical side as well. Knowledge of Jones’s health history, for example, prevented Hotchkiss from giving Laura the wrong medication for an allergy. “I’m prepared for the hard questions Laura might ask later,” says Jones, whose emotions about the adoption run the gamut from relief to joy to pain. “I’ll tell her I placed her because I wanted to be a good father.” His connection with Laura has helped him work through the grief he’s felt. “There’s much more freedom in accepting responsibility than in running from it.”

As part of her agency’s birthfather initiative, Levine hopes to give birthfathers tools to overcome the grief and shame they often experience. “Most agencies view birthfathers as a potential threat to the adoption,” she says. “In the spirit of openness, we want to help birthfathers make sense of the adoption and feel proud of it.”

### ***Birthdads Speak Out***

Warren Jones talks about his experiences because he wants to encourage other birthfathers to stay involved. Likewise, 21-year-old Bob Heath of Portland, who placed his son Jonathan for adoption two years ago, has spoken at several workshops for prospective adoptive families. At one event, he says, the agency gave him a list of potential problems to discuss. “Problem number four was the birthfather,” he says.

“Sure, a lot of men can’t handle the pregnancy and take off, but we also get a bad rap,” says Heath, who says he knew he wasn’t responsible enough to be a father at age 19. “I can barely keep my room clean.” Heath visits the toddler weekly, and maintains a close relationship with Jonathan’s parents. “I assumed we wouldn’t have the birthfather involved,” says Teri Price, Jonathan’s mom. “As it turns out, he’s part of our family.”

Many successful birthfathers trace their involvement back to their own father’s presence—or absence. Troy Meza, age 28, who placed his son David two years ago, was adopted himself. “My birthfather had nothing to do with me,” he reveals. “I knew I couldn’t do that to my kid.” Meza was able to track down his birthmother but not his birthfather. “All I had was his last name. Finding your birthfather just isn’t considered as important as finding your birthmother.” Yet Meza was just as involved in planning his child’s adoption as was David’s birthmother. And both of them (who are friends but not a couple) visit David regularly.

As part of the birthfather project, Open Adoption and Family Services will try to determine what prevents men from getting involved in open adoption—ranging from the kinds of magazines available in the agency waiting room to whether or not there is a male counselor on staff. “There are a lot of men on the periphery who would come in if the signal was there,” says Levine. “Adoption professionals have a lot to learn about birthfathers.”

Ultimately, the child’s well-being is the best way to gauge the value of the birthfather. Ten years of Cody Davis’s visits with Mitchell DeBoer are a testament to this. Whether connecting by phone or in person, the two freely exchange I-love-yous. “They have a unique relationship,” says Mitchell’s mom, Mary-Alice DeBoer. Adds Levine, “Even if birthfathers can’t be great parents, they can be great birthparents.”

## ***How to Include Birthfathers When Talking About Adoption***

A child's story begins with her birth, says Ronny Diamond, the director of the Adoption Resource Center for Spence-Chapin in New York City. "Your child needs to hear that all children are born to two people, and that she is no different." Young children tend to focus on their birthmothers, so you need to make a special effort to include their birthfathers. Diamond suggests these talk techniques:

- **Include the birthfather from the beginning.** The concept of a birthfather is easier to grasp when kids are age three or four, before you need to explain reproduction.  
**You might say:** "It takes a man and a woman to make a baby. The baby grows inside the woman, who then gives birth to the baby. You were born the same way everyone else was. But some babies stay with their birthparents and some don't. Your birthparents couldn't raise any baby at the time you were born. So they made sure to find a family that could take care of you forever. Some children are adopted, and adoption is forever."
- **Say what you know.** If you know a lot about your child's birthfather, he can have a significant presence in your story. If you know very little about either birthparent, you may want to speculate based on what you do know.  
**You might say:** "Your birthparents may have decided together that they weren't able to give a baby a good life, so they probably talked about what would be best for you. That's why they took you to a place where people who cared about you could make sure you went to live with a family who would love you and take care of you forever."
- **Add age-appropriate details.** When your child is age five to seven, you need to be more specific. Again, it's OK to speculate. The key is to be neutral and use language that doesn't label either birthparent in a judgmental way.  
**You might say:** "Your birthmother and birthfather made you. But they weren't together as a couple when you were born, and neither one felt they could raise a baby alone." Or, "Your birthparents didn't know each other very well and your birthmom didn't tell your birthfather about you. She felt that neither of them were grown up enough to take care of a child."

Remember that birthfathers care, too. If you don't know a lot about your child's birthfather, don't assume that he didn't care. Birthfathers are often as interested in their kids as birthmothers. Your child should know that.

*Linda Baker writes about adoption and the family from Portland, Oregon.*

*\* Name has been changed to preserve privacy.*

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