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The Hendrix family

photo by Chris Fritchie

Protecting Your Heart in an Adoption

By Wendy Crooks

FEW THINGS COMPARE emotionally to making the decision to start a family. While many still do it the traditional way, marrying first and trying to have children later, some choose to act now and think about the consequences later. For those, a heart-breaking consequence may be putting the baby up for adoption. For others, their attempts to have a biological child may have proven unsuccessful. The National Center for Health Statistics estimates that ten percent of the childbearing population suffers from infertility issues. Still others may decide they would rather adopt whether they have infertility issues or not.

The decision to have a biological child or adopt is based on very personal reasons. And so is making the decision whether to give a child up for adoption. These concepts alone conjure up strong emotions for nearly anyone with a pulse.

For those who ultimately decide

to adopt, there are many options to consider. Will ours be an open adoption, a domestic or an international adoption? Will we adopt an infant, toddler or an older child? Will the child be a boy or a girl? Might there be siblings involved or left behind with the birth mother or family? How will each scenario affect your family? There are as many things to consider as there are opinions on which option is the most favorable.

One of the monumental concerns for nearly everyone who adopts seems to be whether the birth families should be able to find and/or have contact with the adoptive family. What if the biological parent or parents want to be part of their lives on a regular basis? What if they try to reclaim the child? Thanks to the U.S. media, we've all heard horror stories of adoptive parents who have gotten attached to a baby and the would-be adoption doesn't happen because the birth mom or dad changed their minds.

But does that really happen? Don't they terminate their parental rights? So is it safer, in the long run, to go out of the country to adopt your child to ensure this won't happen?

OPEN, PRIVATE, DOMESTIC OR INTERNATIONAL

An open adoption, or fully disclosed adoption, is one in which the birth family knows who they are relinquishing their baby to and the adoptive family knows quite a bit about the birth family. Adoptive family members interact with the birth families in ways that are most comfortable for them. It can range from letters or calls periodically to regular visits and financial responsibility for the birth.

A private adoption occurs when the adoptive parents do not use an adoption agency but rather adopt a child directly from the birth parents. The advantages of a private adoption include more control,

often less time for a match and more information about the birth family. The disadvantages include unpredictability of costs (usually an agency has a set fee), inability to choose the gender of the baby and possible long-term stress from interacting with the birth family. It is important to note that the legal rights of the birth parents are severed in both open and private adoptions.

A domestic adoption occurs between birth and adoptive parents in the United States and an international adoption is when adoptive parents choose to adopt a child from another country and the adoption is completed in that country. In an international adoption, the process has to be recorded with both the child's home country and the U.S.

DOMESTIC ADOPTION

A Frisco woman, who wishes to have her family remain anonymous, recently brought home a baby boy from another state. She describes her adoption experience as a positive one and an open one. The adoptive mother, who we'll call "Jill Jackson," researched adoptions, both foreign and domestic, for eight or nine months before selecting an adoption facilitator in California. She admits she originally considered a foreign adoption because she initially believed the things she had heard about domestic adoptions being unsafe. Because she has Type I diabetes, some foreign adoption agencies wouldn't allow her to adopt, so she began researching domestic adoptions. "The more I learned about domestic adoptions the more comfortable I became," said Mrs. Jackson.

"The facilitator, Adoption Network, was great. They were able to connect us with more possibilities because they were nationwide and the process was very quick," says Mrs. Jackson. "After my research, my husband and I decided we really wanted an open adoption. We wanted to let our child know he was loved from the beginning and not abandoned. The more information we had about the birth parents, the easier it would be to demonstrate that."

After deciding to go with Adoption Network, the couple had to complete a lot of paperwork, do a home study and write the birth mother a letter. "It was so much paperwork and so

overwhelming we decided to do ten questions a night until we were finished," said Mrs. Jackson.

While the Jacksons expected to wait a year or more to be matched with a birth mother, they got a call in only five months saying they may have a son. They flew out to meet the birth parents and were chosen. "The birth father said he wished he could have had what we were able to provide when he was growing up," Mrs. Jackson said. When it was time for the baby to come, they had only hours to get to the hospital. "The baby came so quickly the birth mother ended up having the baby in a different state from where she was supposed to deliver," said Mrs. Jackson.

You don't really have control over when you will get the call, whether the birth mom will have insurance or even when the adoption will be finalized.

As the adoptive parents, one drawback is the sense of lack of control. "You don't really have control over when you will get the call, whether the birth mom will have insurance or even when the adoption will be finalized," Mrs. Jackson explained. It took six days for the birth parents to sign the Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) and the final adoption papers aren't finished to date.

"My attitude was very open for the birth parents to know where and to whom their child was going. They seemed to be very appreciative of all the information I provided." For that reason, Mrs. Jackson seems confident there is little danger in the birth parents coming to claim her little boy.

INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

Susan Hendrix and her husband know

only too well the immense heartache that a failed adoption can bring. After having two children of their own, Susan and Danny Hendrix decided to adopt a child. "We sold our smaller house and built a new one. We had the baby's room all ready. We were within a week of traveling to another country to get our little girl and things fell apart," recounted Mrs. Hendrix sadly. "Our Visas were denied. We think the birth family took her back." Just like that, their dreams of a baby girl were crushed. "I was broken hearted. My faith was shaken. I couldn't believe it. It seemed like we were doing a good thing so I couldn't understand why it hadn't happened."

The Hendrix family slowly began to consider other options. They discussed becoming a foster family. "Our two older children didn't want to have to give the kids back some day," said Mrs. Hendrix. "So that was not an option for us."

They decided not to give up their dream of an international adoption for several reasons. In a domestic adoption, potential birth moms choose from scrapbooks of "would be parents." Because she already had grown children, Mrs. Hendrix thought a potential birth mom would look at her picture and see someone her mom's age. "I just didn't think a young mom would want someone her mom's age to raise her child." Another thing they considered was how adoptions were being handled in our country. "At the time, there were several cases in court where the children were given back to the birth family because the father didn't sign away his rights," said Mrs. Hendrix.

"I also volunteered in a hospital and saw a collage of blue-eyed babies and felt like God was saying, 'You had that already. It's time for something different, someone different.'" They were ultimately connected with Matthew, six months and Hannah, four-weeks-old. The decision to adopt two children meant, of course, more paperwork. But, it was six months from the time they first saw pictures of the children in December to the time they were finally allowed to travel to Guatemala to bring their babies home. Ten years later, the Hendrix family is thrilled with their children and their decision to adopt internationally.

One consideration for international

adoptions is the amount of information available regarding the prenatal care of the birth mother and the overall health of the baby. In many private adoptions the information is readily available whereas it is a bit sketchier with most international adoptions. For Mrs. Hendrix, the information wasn't immediately available. When she returned to the states, however, her new children were deemed healthy after being examined by nearly every type of pediatric specialist available.

TEXAS REGISTRY PROGRAM

For Texans, there is one more factor to the equation. In 1984, the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) developed a registry to help connect adoptees with their birth family members. Some may want to connect because they have health questions while others are just curious about their backgrounds. While Texas adoption records are confidential and the court records are sealed, there is still the possibility of being connected with a birth family. The

Department has the ability to check the records without a court order and match the birth families. As someone searching for his or her birth family, there can be a major glitch: the birth family has to want to be found. Each party has to voluntarily register with the program.

In 1984, the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) developed a registry to help connect adoptees with their birth family members.

Also, to enlist in the program, each person registering has to complete a counseling session to help prepare for a possible reunion. According to Emily Palmer,

assistant press officer for DSHS, "A person may get into the program just looking for some information but it may turn out to be more than they expected. It becomes more emotional than just gathering the facts," she explains.

In Collin County, there have been 69 individuals who have registered since the inception of the program in 1984. In all, there have been more than 8,100 people who have registered statewide and 20 to 30 matches a year have been made as a result.

For every case and every family, the process will vary. A desire to have a completely closed adoption may or may not be the right thing for the child or the parents. Just as adults are all different, so are children. While one child might be completely fine never knowing their birth family, others may wish to know more details about where they came from and who brought them into the world. Just as parenting doesn't come with a foolproof manual, neither does the process of adoption.

Wendy Crooks is a freelance writer living in Plano.