

## What We Are Learning

Some of you have been participating in the study for more than 3 years, and nearly all of you have completed at least one in-person visit or phone interview. Therefore, we are finally at a stage where we can share some of our early findings with you. In this edition, we focus on information about birth parents and their experiences during the adoption process, including experiences with adoption agencies. Later this fall, this type of information will be shared with the participating adoption agencies nationwide. We hope this information will help adoption agencies learn from your experiences with adoption and will help future birth and adoptive parents have positive adoption experiences.

### **The top five reasons birth parents selected their adoption agency:**

1. The information they received about the adoption agency from a packet, their website, a meeting, or a call to the agency
2. The agency's philosophy about adoption, such as openness
3. Other people's recommendation, word of mouth, or the agency's reputation
4. Services offered to the birth parents, such as counseling, meeting other birth parents, or support groups
5. The agency staff

### **The top five characteristics that birth parents were seeking when choosing an adoptive family:**

1. The parents would provide educational opportunities for the child
2. The parents were financially secure
3. The parents had a close relationship
4. They had the type of family that the birth parents would have liked when they were growing up
5. One of the adoptive parents would stay at home with the child

### **What was the nicest or most important thing done for birth fathers during the adoption process?**

1. Emotional support from friends, family, and the birth mother: having nonjudgmental people take time to listen or to talk through options
2. Practical support from friends and family: providing financial support, helping improve work and/or living situations, and providing transportation to appointments
3. The relationship with the adoptive family: spending time with the birth parents, providing emotional and practical support, and showing gratitude for their decision
4. Adoptive parents deciding/agreeing to raise the child and providing the child with love and opportunities
5. The support received in the hospital from friends, family members, and nurses throughout the birthing process and during placement

### **What was the nicest or most important thing done for birth mothers during the adoption process? (In addition to the list below, many birth mothers mentioned the support from siblings, co-workers, nurses, doctors, and their other children.)**

1. Adoptive family providing emotional support, practical support, or significant gifts (photo album, locket, or spa/salon trip)
2. Emotional and practical support from friends: listening to them without judgment, driving them to appointments, spending time with them during the birthing process, or throwing "me" parties instead of baby showers
3. Love, support, and acceptance from parents
4. Support from a partner (husband or boyfriend)
5. Support from the adoption agency or counselor

## Stories from the Interview Team

In our last newsletter, we featured a piece called "A Day in the Life of an Interviewer," in which interviewers told stories of road-tripping for the study. We received many positive comments about that article and, as a result, have asked one interviewer from each site to share some information about themselves and their experiences working for the project. You have all opened your homes and your lives to our study. In return, we want to share more about our team and the people who are traveling great distances to interview you.

### **Denise Ford, University of California at Davis**

My name is Denise Ford, and I have been working with the Early Growth and Development Study for 3 years. I graduated from the University of Oregon in 1985 and worked for 18 years interviewing children and families at the Oregon Social Learning Center before moving to California in 2002.

I enjoy traveling from coast to coast and often do so as efficiently as possible. On a recent trip I had breakfast in Ohio, lunch in Pennsylvania, gassed up the car in Maryland, had dinner in Virginia, and traveled to North Carolina the next day! Through my job and personal travel, I have visited 47 states. This year, I hope to achieve my goal of visiting all 50. When I have a little free time on my work trips, I enjoy visiting botanical gardens.

It has been wonderful meeting participants at their local Starbucks, at restaurants, and in their homes, and I have thoroughly enjoyed facilitating each interview in the study. I admire the strength of each individual I meet and often wonder if I could handle the same circumstances with such grace. It has been a privilege to hear these incredible adoption stories, and I thank participants for sharing these amazing experiences with us!

### **Nooshin Sturdivant, George Washington University, Washington, DC**

My name is Nooshin Sturdivant, and I have been interviewing birth and adoptive families for the Early Growth and Development Study for almost 2 years. I am currently pursuing my doctorate in clinical psychology with a specialty in child and adolescent therapy. My work with the study has been an important and invaluable complement to my studies, allowing me firsthand experience with families and a much more accurate view of the adoption process than anything I could learn in class.

I have enjoyed the study immensely and have come to appreciate the varied experiences of our participants and the warm welcomes that I receive in their homes. The many incredible individuals who take time out of their lives to help our study are clearly dedicated to the adoption process.

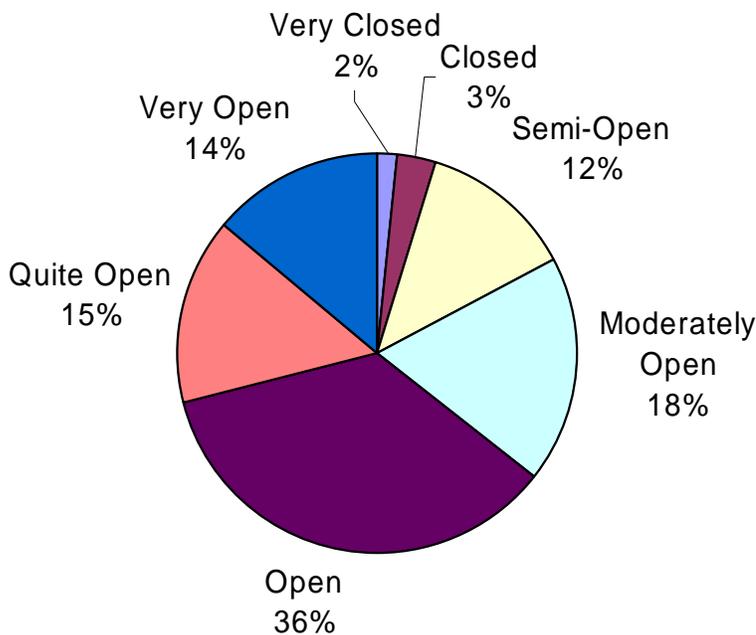
Through the study, I have traveled to Florida, Alabama, Oregon, Louisiana, and Rhode Island. In fact, I am now a regular at the nearest car rental agency, where I receive free upgrades from the employees who are always excited to hear my next travel destination. I have driven more these past 2 years than ever before and have accumulated a pile of MapQuest directions about 3 inches thick from my trips! I look forward to future travels and am grateful to our participants for their help in the study.

## Description of Participating Birth Parents

Age (at time of delivery)	Birth mothers	Birth fathers
Younger Than 18	12%	7%
18-24	49%	53%
25-29	20%	18%
30-34	12%	11%
35-39	5%	7%
40 or Older	2%	4%

Ethnicity	Birth mothers	Birth fathers
American Indian/Alaska Native	3%	1%
Asian	2%	1%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	1%
Black/African American	10%	6%
White (Including White Hispanics and Latinos)	76%	79%
More Than One Race	6%	9%
Refused to Answer	3%	3%

### Level of Openness



**Very Closed:** Birth parents (BP) have no information about adoptive parents (AP).

**Closed:** BP only has general info about AP, which was provided by agency.

**Semi-Open:** All communication between BP and AP is through an agency.

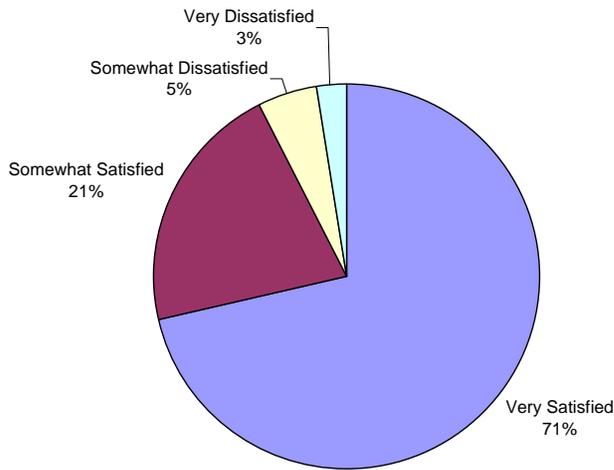
**Moderately Open:** BP communicates by phone or email with AP but has no face-to-face contact.

**Open:** BP and AP have 1-3 in-person visits a year and communicate regularly.

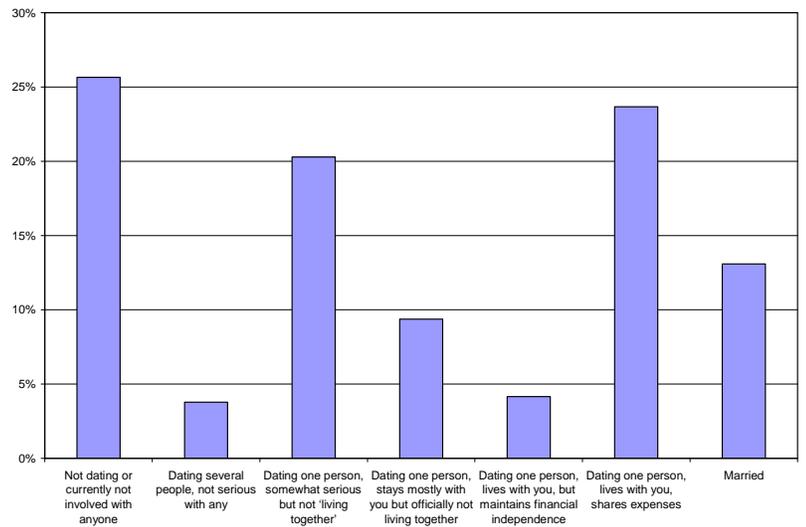
**Quite Open:** BP and AP visit every other month and communicate often by phone or email.

**Very Open:** BP and AP visit at least once a month and communicate weekly by phone or email.

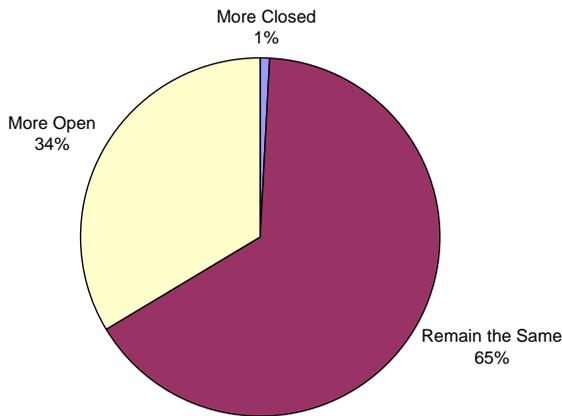
## Satisfaction with Openness



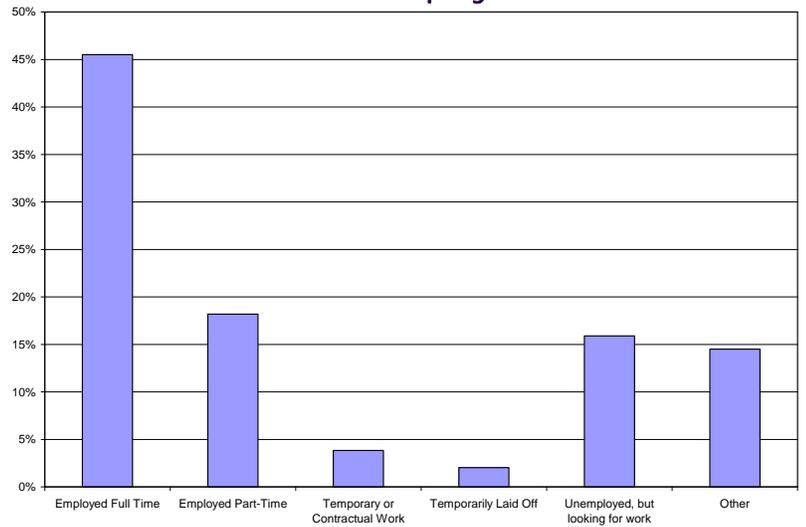
## Birth Parent Relationship Status



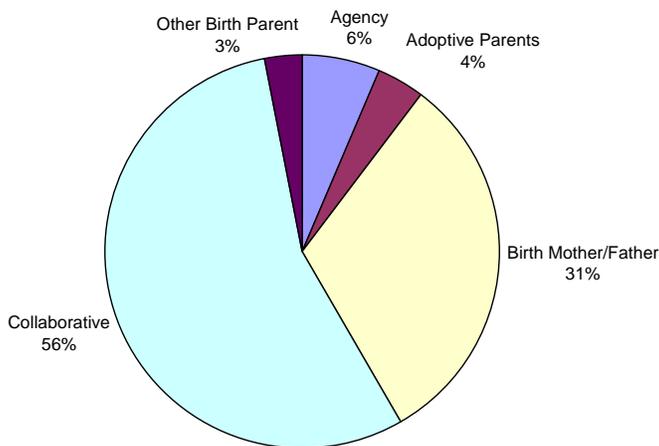
## Desired Change in Openness



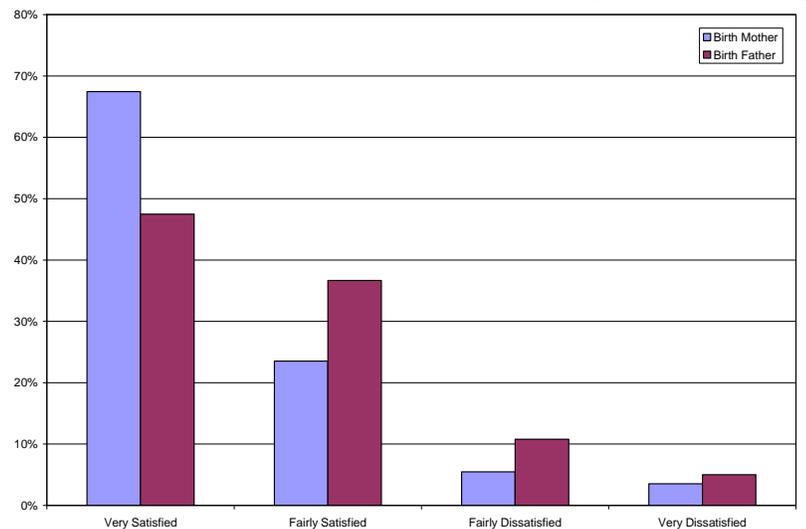
## Birth Parent Employment Status



## Choice Regarding Openness



## Birth Parents' Satisfaction with the Amount of Contact with Adoptive Family



**Agency:** The agency had a pre-established policy on the level of openness.  
**Adoptive Parents:** The adoptive parents decided on the level of openness.  
**Birth Mother/Father:** The birth mother and/or birth father decided on the level of openness.  
**Collaborative:** The adoptive family had some choice, negotiated with birth parents and/or agency regarding the level of openness.  
**Other Birth Parent:** The birth father reported that the birth mother decided on the level of openness.



## Erin Baldwin, Oregon Social Learning Center, Eugene, OR

My name is Erin Baldwin, and I have been working as an interviewer for the Early Growth and Development Study for almost 2 years. I recently graduated from the University of Oregon with degrees in journalism and psychology and hope to become a social worker in the field of adoption or foster care. This fall, I will begin my graduate study of social work at Portland State University and will be working for the child welfare division of the local Department of Human Services.

Working for the study has been an incredible learning experience for me. Through interviews with birth and adoptive families, I have grown to appreciate the complexities of the adoption process. The study has given me a unique opportunity to interact with individuals and families and to hear testimonials about the challenges of pregnancy and parenting. Hearing about such experiences has provided me a foundation of knowledge about the challenges affecting families and agencies, and I have learned to appreciate the time, thought, and love that goes into making an adoption plan. It is wonderful to hear that so many birth parents are pleased with their adoption decision and that, in turn, many adoptive families are able to start or expand their families.

Adoption is a true blessing for birth parents, adoptive parents, and (most of all) the child. I have enjoyed watching the children grow from babies to toddlers. It still surprises me how each child reacts differently to the toys and activities that we bring into the home. Although I do the same activities with all participants, each family brings a new experience.

As many adoptive families may already know, the most challenging part of the interview for me is getting all those bags up a steep driveway. (You should see me in an airport!) I have been able to travel to New Orleans, Chicago, Texas, Las Vegas, and all over the Pacific Northwest, inevitably forming close friendships with the staff of each local car rental agency and each local drive-through barista. I have become so accustomed to travel, in fact, that I was seemingly unphased by a 30-hour transit on a personal trip to India! Luckily, I love to travel and greatly enjoy exploring new cities and meeting our wonderful participants!

## Please Keep in Touch!

Keeping in touch with you is very important to us. We understand that you might move or get a new telephone number. Even if you move to another state, you can still participate. If any of your contact information changes—for example, a new telephone number or address—please call or write to us using the information below. When you contact us with your new information, we will send a \$10 thank-you payment. **Speaking of new contact information, please note our new address!**

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## Study Update

We are in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of our study and are happy to report that we have reached our recruitment goals. We have finished enrolling new participants, and there are 528 birth mothers, 145 birth fathers, and 357 adoptive families active in the study. We will continue to visit and interview participants through the spring of 2008.

Due to the success of the study, we have developed several new research projects, including two projects under consideration for funding from the National Institutes of Health. The first project would allow us to enroll additional birth parents and adoptive families into the study through 2008, giving us a larger sample size and helping us to learn more about the roles of birth parents and adoptive parents in the development of adoptive children. The second project would continue to follow the participants of the current study. In this project, we would visit some of the birth parents once again and visit some of the adoptive families through the preschool and school-entry periods. Both projects have received initial praise and positive reviews. We are very excited about the future of the study and will keep you up to date about these pending projects.

Recently, a few members of the study team attended the Second International Conference for Adoption Research in Norwich, England. The conference attendees included adoption researchers and professionals (social workers, counselors, etc.) from all over the world. Our study's lead investigator, David Reiss (at George Washington University), gave a presentation on rearing children in the adoptive family environment. Leslie Leve at Oregon Social Learning Center and Amy Whitesel at George Washington University gave a workshop on working together with adoption agencies to conduct research with birth parents and adoptive families. Our study team hopes to present at many future conferences as more data are collected and analyzed.

## Site Spotlight

In past newsletters, we have highlighted George Washington University and the University of California at Davis. In this edition, we focus on the Oregon Social Learning Center (OSLC), our Pacific Northwest site. OSLC is a nonprofit, collaborative research center in Eugene, OR. Established in 1977 by a group of faculty and graduate students in the Psychology Department at the University of Oregon, OSLC has maintained a strong foundation in intervention, preventative treatment, and education for almost 30 years. OSLC currently houses more than 20 research projects looking at healthy development and family functioning. These studies focus on research and interventions that strengthen children, adolescents, families, and communities. The Center employs more than 250 staff members, including research scientists, clinical psychologists, family interventionists, parent educators, statisticians, computer programmers, observers, interviewers, and support staff. Since 1990, OSLC has been funded as a Prevention Research Center dedicated to improving child well-being. Thus, many OSLC studies involve parent education, skills training, behavioral problems, foster care, adoption, and partnerships with community agencies and organizations with the collective aim of encouraging successful adjustment and discouraging aggressive behaviors within the family, the school, and the community. More information about OSLC is available online: <http://www.oslc.org/>