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HOME & DIGITAL

One Baby, Two Moms: a Rise in Open Adoptions

By Mara Lemos Stein

As Susan Edwards and Scott Cargle last month held their adopted newborn daughter Lydia in the hospital in Greenbrae, Calif., like all parents, they wondered what her future would hold.

But some things they knew for certain: With an open adoption, they will visit with their daughter's birth mother at least once a year, phone her at least twice a year and exchange a minimum of two emails a year with photos and updates. They will also take a group picture every time they meet.

As opposed to closed or confidential adoptions, open adoptions allow the adoptive and birth families some degree of contact, which can range from a single, in-person meeting to sharing photos and news periodically, to frequent reunions. In a shift over the past 30 years, the vast majority of domestic adoptions are now open. The phenomenon has become more visible over the past few years thanks, in part, to the popular MTV series "Teen Mom," which prominently features an open adoption.

In about half of U.S. states, including California, families can choose an enforceable contract agreement that firms up the relationship's parameters. Adoptions aren't reversed, but if a dispute arises, it can be settled using the court that completed the adoption or through mediation.

Ms. Edwards and Mr. Cargle say hashing out the details of how to keep in touch with the birth mother, Sarah Raetzloff, 26, helped them understand open adoption and build trust.

"It's a good thing to have the agreement, and it's not even about its enforceability," says Ms. Edwards. "Because of the contract, we all know what to expect....Having that agreement does a lot to take away the nervousness or anxiety."

Ms. Raetzloff says she checked out several other families before picking Mr. Cargle and Ms. Edwards. "I wanted to do this because I'd like the comfort; I prayed a lot," she says. "I'm very pleased with the communication we've had since it started."

A three-decade study called the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project tracked 720 people—adopting parents, children and birth mothers—and found all parties involved in an open adoption usually found it more satisfying than families involved in closed adoptions.

Openness in adoption has been spreading across the U.S. since the 1980s, when agencies started brokering contact between birth and adoptive families. Birth families were demanding a greater role in choosing an adoptive family for their babies, and birth mothers had more clout in the negotiating process as the stigma of having child out of wedlock eased.

Today, there is some degree of contact in about 95% of adoptions, according to a study published in March by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in New York, a nonprofit focused on adoption policy and practice. That is up from 79% in 1999 and about 36% in the late 1980s.

There are about 133,000 domestic adoptions in the U.S., but only about 18,000 of those are of newborns, according to National Council for Adoption data from 2007, the latest available. That number has been falling steadily as contraception became widely available and abortion was legalized. There were 22,300 newborn adoptions in 2002, according to the nonprofit advocacy group.

In another shift, about two-thirds of domestic adoptions are conducted without the help of an agency. Prospective parents post online profiles or classified ads.

Post-placement contact agreements came into use in the 1990s, and even agencies in states where the contracts aren't enforceable use them to provide adoptive and birth families a framework for their relationship.

"Open adoption makes families more complicated," says Harold Grotevant, a psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who is the co-lead researcher of the Minnesota/Texas project.

"In the old days, you were adding a child to an existing family; in open adoption, you are really transforming your family to incorporate your child's birth relatives," says Dr. Grotevant.

When open adoption started gaining traction in the late 1980s and early 1990s, critics argued it would confuse children about their identity and hurt their self-esteem, and that it would make birth mothers grieve longer as they continued to see the children. Most of that criticism has evaporated, experts say, but some add that the open-adoption system needs refining, with better training for social workers and education for expectant parents.

The Adoption Institute surveyed professionals at 100 adoption agencies across the U.S. in 2009 and 2010 and found prospective adoptive parents and expectant parents needed significant help to understand open adoption and develop arrangements that worked. The Institute is preparing for release later this year a curriculum for professionals and parents to follow to maximize the chances for a happy adoption.

Katy Katzenbach, a 20-year-old college student in Elmhurst, Ill., grew up having frequent contact with her birth mother, Jennifer Peterson Bordean—who was 16 when Katy was born—and her birth-grandmother Nancy. Ms. Katzenbach was junior bridesmaid in her birth mother's wedding a few years ago. Her family also has a close relationship with her brother Kevin's birth father, Jeff Bakula, and his birth-grandparents. The Katzenbachs don't have legally enforceable contact agreements.

When going through the typical teenage soul searching, Ms. Katzenbach had to grapple with "this very strange extra layer" of open adoption, she says. "Asking what it means to be adopted is like asking what it means to be Irish, or to be gay—it's an identifier," she says. "To me, it means I have a few extra people who love me, who I consider family."

A 2006 study published in the journal Adoption Quarterly involving 73 adopted children between ages 8 and 13 and their parents found a link between the amount of contact children had with their birth families and how positive they felt about themselves. Another study of 592 pregnant women published in Marriage and Family Review in 1997 found 46% chose adoptions, and the 69% of those who picked the adoptive family reported less grief, regret and sadness than those who didn't.

One risk of setting up enforceable agreements, Dr. Grotevant says, is that they might not take into account how relationships among the children and families naturally evolve over time. People move, new relationships develop and attitudes can change.

"I don't think there's anything to be afraid of, but families need to think it through," says Ann Wrixon, executive director of the Independent Adoption Center, a nonprofit agency that Ms. Edwards and Mr. Cargle used. "If you're setting up a contract for 18 years, don't set up something to meet once a month because that's not realistic."

Ed Katzenbach

Katy Katzenbach, second from right, at the June 2008 wedding of her birth mother, Jennifer Peterson Bordean, second from left. They are joined by Ms. Katzenbach's adoptive mom, Sue, far right, and her birth grandmother, Nancy, far left.

Edwards/Cargle Family

Scott Cargle and his wife, Susan Edwards, far right, greeted their openly adopted daughter Lydia with her birth mother, Sarah Raetzloff, shortly after the child was born.

95%

The estimated portion of domestic adoptions with some degree of openness, up from about 36% in the late 1980s.

Opening Up»

Scan this code to watch a video with Mara Lemos Stein discussing the growth of open adoptions, or watch it at **WSJ.com/Lifestyle.**

The College Challenge of Virtually Decorating a Dorm Room

Continued from page D1

now than they did five years ago, averaging $929 per family in 2012 compared with $839 in 2007.

Some families predict spending a lot more. Corrie Bowen, whose daughter Nora will be leaving Williston Park, N.Y. to attend Pennsylvania State University, thinks they will shell out closer to $1,500. To attract the campus set, many stores begin advertising for the back-to-school season—the second-biggest shopping period of the year after Christmas—in March.

Ms. Spiak, the freshman from Phoenix, says she spends hours each week browsing online and looks at what her friends are buying online.

Ms. Spiak says she is "paranoid" about falling behind. Less than one week before move-in day, all she bought so far is a spork, a multipurpose utensil she picked up at an art museum. "At least it's a start," she says.

College shopping didn't used to be so complex. Cindy Adams, whose son Marc will be attending the University of Rhode Island in the fall, says when she first went to college, she bought "some sheets, towels, a bedspread and that's pretty much it."

Ms. Adams and her husband Julius, who live in Rego Park, N.Y., are spearheading their son's shopping efforts. "I picked out his pillows and comforter. It's blue-and-white striped," she says. Her husband adds, "We texted him photos."

For his part, Marc contacted his future roommates, and together they identified the essentials. "I'm bringing the microwave, speakers and printer," Marc says. "They're bringing the TV, fridge and the Xbox 360."

Jason Pina, who has worked in student affairs at colleges for nearly 20 years, says he sees fewer roommate pairs showing up with duplicate items because they have already planned in advance.

Janice Katz of Manhattan has also led dorm shopping for her daughter, Jacqui, a freshman attending Tulane University. Ms. Katz picked up the Container Store's college list earlier in the summer, and she and Jacqui ordered more than $400 of stuff, including drawer liners, skinny hangers, poster tabs and bulletin boards. They arranged for the company to ship their purchases to New Orleans.

Mr. Pina, vice president for student affairs at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts, says some parents take it too far by physically arranging and decorating their child's room while he or she looks on. While at the University of Rhode Island, he had to step into a few rooms during move-in each year and remind parents, "Let your student decorate his own room."

Chris Moody, assistant vice president for housing and dining programs at American University, says resident assistants sometimes have to mediate design or layout disputes between students and parents. Most commonly, students and parents disagree on how closet and drawer space is best utilized.

Parents want to be comfortable with their child's room by the time they leave campus, Mr. Moody says. After they leave, "students will naturally change their room to fit them as they settle in," he says.

In recent years, many colleges have updated residence halls as a way to stand out among competitors. Some rooms are equipped with individual room-temperature controls, private bathrooms and built-in flat-screen televisions. Common lounge spaces can feature furnished kitchens, tea and coffee services and study and game tables, like pool, air hockey and ping pong.

Still, the size of the rooms has remained much the same. So as students' shopping lists get longer, they're arriving with more gear than rooms can hold.

Mr. Moody, the American University administrator, says he still sees families show up with U-Hauls on move-in day. After realizing that they can't possibly fit everything into the school's average 180-square-foot dorm room, the parents return home with the truck full of things that didn't make the cut.

Mr. Pina advises students not to worry about remembering every single thing.

"It's better to forget an item or two and bring it later," he says. "You don't have to bring your winter coat in August."

Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal (4)

STOCKING UP. Jessie Kim and Alex Han, above left and right, shopped at a college night event at the Container Store in New York earlier this month. Scanning devices, above right, help students track purchases. Below, four Manhattan freshmen, from left, Angela Bida, Alexandra Gutowski, Kate Reyes and Gabriella Carr-Malatzky chat at the event. Ms. Reyes says outfitting her dorm room is about more than just décor. 'It's a place to chill out away from all the homework and tests. It's a place you can call your own.'

PARENTAL GUIDANCE. Cindy, Marc and Julius Adams of Rego Park, N.Y., shopped at the Container Store event to gather items for Marc's Rhode Island dorm room.

Amercan University

A typical dorm room, like this rendering from American University, is 180-square-feet.

Room for Improvement»

Scan this code to watch a video on ways college students make over dorm rooms, or see it at **WSJ.com/Lifestyle.**

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