

The Optimal Adoptive Launch

Author: Trout, Michael D, MA

Publication info: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal 11. 2 (Winter 1996): 93-99.

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: None available.

Full Text: The adoptive mother said, "You are so beautiful. How could she ever have given you up? Maybe in some mystical way she is mine. Maybe she was just destined to grow inside another woman's womb." The adoptive mother wrote in her diary: On February 25th Jessica's umbilical cord fell off." The adoptive mother "took it as a sign. That day, a court hearing was held, officially terminating [the birthmother's] parental rights. It was the last time [she] could have changed her mind. 'Jessica is ours. Today at 9:02 a.m.' " (Franks, p. 59). Regarding the birthfather she said, "There is no way I am giving Jessica to that man! No way in hell!" (Franks, p. 66). The birthmother-speaking of a judge who had just issued a ruling in the case-"How can he do this? How can he do this? She is my baby!" (Franks, p. 69). The New Yorker magazine said, "By the child's second birthday she would be in an unprotected limbo, treated by the courts not as a person but as a disputed possession. She would have no legal mother, no legal name, and no suspicion as she grew and played that her world could topple at any moment" (Franks, p. 58). It was actually a very short time ago, in human history, when men were able to put their own children to death, if they chose, without intervention by the state. The children, after all, belonged to the men; they were their property. Men could also buy other men and women (who happened to be black), and they considered themselves the owners of their wives. It took a war and much social upheaval to turn these presumptions of ownership on their heads. Only one remains: that babies are the property of certain self-appointed or state-appointed adults. And women are joining in this presumption with righteous bravado. Babies cannot be owned. As one adoptive mother put it, "Babies are not anyone's possession. They are passing through, and we are their custodians." This applies both to the body of the baby and to that body of information about him/her known euphemistically as "The Records"-the child's story. Both the baby's body and the baby's story belong to the baby. No law may be enacted which deprives any baby of either. And the only laws enforceable about either are those which protect the baby's rights to both. The adoptive mother later wrote, "Jessi, I feel like all of this is my mess" (Franks, p. 65). "I just want to crawl into myself and never come out. My daughter who is not really my daughter is slipping through my fingers with no way to really grasp her and have her be mine" (Franks, p. 66). And finally: "Even if we win in court, we will never be able to legally adopt her, because of [the birthfather's] parental rights While we sit here and debate is she theirs, is she ours, I realize she is no one's. She is not a piece of property. She is an individual, who is learning to walk, talk, sing At the end of the day, I want to say that I have been her guardian ad litem. I have to keep in my mind that we will recover from this, but she will not" (Franks, p. 69). Baby Jessica did not have an optimal adoptive launch. While her case has garnered more media attention and notoriety for both families than most, the truth is that many adopted babies get a less-than-optimal adoptive launch. So what would such a launch look like, from the baby's point of view? BABY AS WITNESS Above all, it would be one in which it was acknowledged that the baby is an observer-a witness-as the birthparents and the adoptive parents do their work of living, and deciding, and preparing. After all, at a gestational age of six months this baby had already been attending to rhythms of movement, sound and chemistry, getting to know her mother and the few visitors who draw near to her world. By eight months she was listening in on conversations, playing with the cord, jumping at loud noises or fretting at hormone surges, and complaining about the food. At a few days of postnatal life she was looking out for herself by noticing changes in familiar routines and rhythms. She had a chemically-encoded memory of her mother and of their long life together. As a newborn, she was flexible enough-what else could she do?-to adapt to changes, to allow new people in. She noticed, of course. She was

a well-formed, real human being, with characteristic ways of moving, coping, looking, being. She might have a funny second toe just like her father, and a particular way of blinking or a dislike of tapioca just like her mom. But, another part of her remains to be formed-particular ways of relating, ideas about how the world works and how she fits in it. She is watching and learning, but not necessarily telling us what she has learned. (So the birthmother was mistaken when she raged at the judges, in her daughter's twelfth month, "Don't they know she's still little and if she comes home now it won't hurt her?" (Franks, p. 67)) As the weeks and months wear on, we see that this baby-and every baby-is some kind of complicated combination of what she came as, what she has seen and experienced, what she is being "taught" about herself and the world and about confidence and safety and trust and love. Her attachment to her new family is growing. Her cognitive awareness of her birthmother is dim because her cognitive capacities are limited, as is her language-which means merely that she has no words to describe her observations and her experiences. But she has not forgotten. She has other capacities for storing her awareness. So all the while let us never forget that a person is watching, witnessing, storing impressions. It might change our behavior-it would certainly change our attitude-if we understood that. And it might improve the adoptive launch.

THE ADOPTIVE FAMILY'S PREGNANCY An optimal adoptive launch would be one preceded by pregnancy-in both families. Important psychological work is done in all pregnancies, and we know that the child always gets a better deal if this work is uninterrupted by premature delivery, the death of someone in mom's or dad's family, or something else big enough to sidetrack mother and father from their unconscious emotional preparation. But it turns out that adoptive parents must have a pregnancy, too. It just cannot be that the adoptive parents have so little time and opportunity to be pregnant that all of their energies must be focused on getting the baby out of there (away from the birth family). This is unnatural, and it makes people manipulative, dishonest with themselves, and incomplete. A pregnant woman does not begin pregnancy thinking only of how to get the baby out of there (away from her uterus). She and the baby's father get to linger over the separateness and reality of the baby in this place they cannot touch. They get to be crazy and have raging ambivalence and want to forget the whole thing and be thrilled and scared. They get to ponder all the ways their lives will be changed, and again they get a chance to fantasize running away, as well as to fantasize the wonder of opening their space and their hearts to this separate and mysterious new person. They sometimes struggle with their terror that something is wrong or their certainty that the baby has gone away-and sometimes they deal with the baby actually dying, and leaving them. Adoptive parents need to be pregnant, too, to do their work, to experience this range of feelings. When infertility has been a factor, allowing the ambivalence is harder. When there is little time for pregnancy, the work may go on for awhile even after placement, and that can be tough. Maybe a birthmother wants the baby back (or, perhaps, merely wants to see the baby) in the middle of the adoptive mom's pregnancy work-which, at that very moment, happens to include ambivalence about "having" a baby. Perhaps she has not quite reached the claiming stage, where the baby and mother are felt to be one. Such incompleteness of this normal psychological work-juxtaposed against an external perceived threat, like the birth-mother's presence-may result in a terrible ignoring of the real baby and a desperate, compensatory clutching at the infant's body: "He is mine! You can not have him!" An optimal adoptive launch requires that both families are able to be pregnant, and that both do their preparatory psychological work. It may be that the pregnancies of the two families need to merge, at some point, with certain of the work done together. One adoptive mother likened the many hours she and the birthmother spent together-preparing for the baby and for the transition-to teenagers having those no-holds-barred, secret, all-night, marathon disclosure sessions. Such time and sharing forms the basis for: * a spiritual connection that lasts a lifetime * absolute trust * meticulous respect * absolute commitment-including a commitment that it will happen and that it will work * a shared appreciation for the deep pain and the individual marvel of this baby This kind of trust, respect, commitment and spiritual connectedness must be developed while the question of baby ownership is on the shelf. (During the pregnancy after all, it is clear: the baby belongs to the birthmother. That is where he/she is, and that is that.) So a lifetime commitment is formed. One adoptive mother who

believes this, and who went on to try to adopt a second baby, spoke of feeling uncomfortably promiscuous. She was tied forever to her first baby's birthmother. She did not know if she could make such a commitment to another. One adoptive mother who made such a commitment discovered that the birthmother was suicidal when the baby was about age one or so. She was furious, and reminded the birthmother she did not have the right to kill herself. She (the birthmother) was a mother, after all, and they had made a deal, a commitment to each other and to this baby for life. So babies who got an optimal adoptive launch had birthparents and adoptive parents who got to be pregnant, and who did some of their pregnancy work together. You cannot skip this part. It is not optional. Jessica's parents did not do it. Jessica is being hurt. Most mothers experience a type of grief-some only feel it as an odd post-partum letdown-when their baby moves from the inside to the outside. If part of the birthmother's psychological work of pregnancy has not included a chance for her to secure safe passage for her baby from her body to another's arms and heart, she will grieve forever. BABY-DRIVENESS Finally, an optimal adoptive launch would be a baby-driven one. Both sets of parents should be given guidance about this baby, and about babies in general. No one would be allowed to forget that this is about this human being. It is not about filling a hole, it is not about adult convenience, and it is not about fixing a mistake. As soon as adoption becomes lawyer-driven, cause-driven, or agency-procedure-driven, the chance that this baby will be protected is reduced to just that: chance. No baby-driven search group could ever name itself "Finders Keepers" (as does one in Delaware). Adoptive parents could never refuse to return a one-month-old to a birthparent who has changed her mind, if they were baby-driven. And no baby-driven birth-parents could ever keep up the interminable fight, forcing Judge Ager to eventually implore of the birthparents, as he was handing down his decision that Jessica would-at age two-remain with the adoptive parents: "Think of the possibility of saying-'Enough.' Prolonging this battle is going to have a terrible effect on this child When she is older . . . tell this young woman that you fought your hardest . . . and you will tell her 'I love you, I wanted you, it broke my heart.' " Then, commenting on the adoptive parents' stated hope that "Some day when this is done and over with, I pray that all four of us and this young girl will have a relationship," he said, "I think this is possible, but I do not think it is possible if you are going to continue fighting, fighting, and fighting. Be heroes. People all over the United States would say, These people have acted in the best interest of the child' " (Franks, p. 72). A baby-driven adoptive parent might write a letter like this one, composed by a foster/adoptive mother who decided it was best to give back a five-month-old girl placed with her at eleven days of life, due to maternal drug addiction (which profoundly affected the pre-born child). She and the foster father would have very much liked to adopt her, but they knew this was not about what they wanted or needed. So when the birthfather got himself in shape to care for his daughter, the very sorrowful but baby-driven and triumphant foster mother wrote to the dad a letter to be read in court, at the hearing. In part, it said: "I am struggling with my grief as I say goodbye to Louise. To have used myself as a tool to better the life of another . . . is a unique experience. But this is hard work. You also have weathered the storm and you have a relationship with her. One of the hardest lessons is to realize that this love story is about the baby's life. It is not about you or me or the system. "John, I have trust that you will know if she needs to see me again and will arrange a visit, for YOU are now her witness and her helper. You will be the one to listen to her 'voice,' which for her is about her body tone . . . her appetite, her weight gain, and her sucking, and her eye contact and, of course, her crying. I pray that you will be able to hear her voice and honor what she is saying. "If this job becomes too difficult, too frustrating, or seems to be 'going wrong' you have the responsibility to ask for help, because your daughter will grow and learn from what she sees and hears around her. You love your baby and this love deserves the greatest respect. "I feel that this story does not belong in the courts because this human/love part that I am talking about is not written into our laws. You are in charge of her and you are the one who will decide how this baby lives her life. This is very important work. My family and I wish you both well Love, Anne" (Williams). Maybe a sign on the walls of our offices and the walls of both birthparents' homes and adoptive parents' homes should take a cue from the Clinton campaign. It would read, "It's the Baby, stupid!" If we really believed that a baby was watching us-that a whole human being, whose life

was in our hands, was witnessing our every move-could we ever be cavalier again? Would it really be so confusing to know what to do (as a birthparent or an adoptive parent or a caseworker)? Shall we ask the child how to optimize his or her own adoption? References REFERENCES Franks, L. Annals of Law: The War for Baby Clausen. The New Yorker, March 22, 1993, pp. 56-73. Williams, A. Personal communication, 1993. AuthorAffiliation Michael D. Trout, M.A. AuthorAffiliation Versions of this paper were presented at the Fourth National Conference on Open Adoption (April, 1993) and at the Sixth International Congress of the Pre- and Perinatal Psychology Association of North America (July, 1993). Michael D. Trout, M.A., who was trained in Infant Psychiatry at the University of Michigan, is the Director of The Infant-Parent Institute and the founding President of the International Association for Infant Mental Health. He is also a member of the APPPAH Board of Directors. Direct correspondence to The Infant-Parent Institute, 328 North Neil Street, Champaign, IL 61820.

Publication title: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal

Volume: 11

Issue: 2

Pages: 93-99

Number of pages: 7

Publication year: 1996

Publication date: Winter 1996

Year: 1996

Publisher: Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health

Place of publication: New York

Country of publication: United States

Journal subject: Medical Sciences--Obstetrics And Gynecology, Psychology, Birth Control

ISSN: 08833095

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: General Information

ProQuest document ID: 198691424

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198691424?accountid=36557>

Copyright: Copyright Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health Winter 1996

Last updated: 2010-06-06

Database: ProQuest Public Health

Contact ProQuest

Copyright © 2012 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. - [Terms and Conditions](#)