



Education Services
Transforming Knowledge into Skills

**OPENNESS IN ADOPTION:
UNDERSTANDING LEGISLATION AND SHARING PRACTICE**
Webinar User Guide and
Considerations for Organizing a Panel of Local Experts
March 2013



Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies
The voice of child welfare in Ontario

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Table of Contents

Overview	2
How to Make Optimum Use of the Webinar	2
Accessing the webinar	2
Who should access the webinar?	2
How to gain the most from the webinar	3
Using the Webinar as a Learning Opportunity	3
Planning Your Session	3
Day of the Webinar Viewing	4
Organizing a Panel in Your Community	6
Choosing your panellists	6
Preparing for the panel	6
On the day of the panel	7
During the panel	7
Following up.....	8
Other Available Learning Resources.....	8
Appendix 1: Panel Questions.....	9



Overview

This User Guide is designed to assist child welfare and private adoption organizations to use the *Openness in Adoption: Understanding Legislation and Sharing Practice* webinar as a training opportunity for staff. In order to enhance professionals' understanding of the implications of the new legislation on practice, the user guide also outlines considerations for scheduling and hosting a community panel.

With the new legislative provisions in the CFSA that came about as a result of Bill 179, it is important for professionals working in both the child welfare and private adoption fields to understand the background and rationale of this new legislation as well as its implications for practice. On March 22, 2013, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS,) in collaboration with the Openness in Adoption Curriculum Advisory Sub-Committee, hosted a webinar to present these legislative changes and provide insight into implications for practice. This was done with the help of a multi-disciplinary panel of experts, representing the different players involved in facilitating open adoptions. The target audience for the webinar was professionals working in children's aid societies, private adoption practitioners and lawyers working both in and outside of the child welfare field.

The webinar was recorded and the archived webinar has been posted to the OACAS website, thus making it available to child welfare organizations, private adoption practitioners, legal services teams and any other interested parties.

How to Make Optimum Use of the Webinar

Accessing the webinar

The webinar can be accessed via the OACAS website at www.oacas.org/adoptionopenness and can be viewed by individuals or groups.

Who should access the webinar?

All staff working for children's aid societies (regardless of the department they work in - adoption, child protection, children's services, resources, family services, etc.), all private adoption practitioners, as well as lawyers who are involved in adoption cases, will benefit from viewing the webinar and discussing the content with their peers. As openness in adoption needs to be considered from the early stages of permanency planning for children, all of the above-mentioned professionals should make an effort to watch the webinar and understand the implications for practice.



How to gain the most from the webinar

The webinar consists of the following sections:

1. Welcome and Introductions (6 mins)
2. Openness at a Glance Presentation (22 mins)
3. Understanding Implications and Sharing Practice: A Panel Discussion; Q&A (91 mins)
4. Continued Learning re. Openness in Adoption and Final Remarks (4 mins)

It is recommended that individuals or groups either schedule a half-day to watch the entire webinar recording (which is approximately 125 minutes in length) or schedule 30 to 90 minutes to view the first 30 minutes up til the end of the presentation and before the panel begins (the latter option will work well if you will be organizing your own local panel). Building in some extra time will allow for learners to reflect on what is heard and think about the implications for their own practice, through considering and responding to the discussion questions posed in this guide.

Consider scheduling a viewing of the webinar during team meetings, board meetings and other adoption practice related meetings. Your Agency Training Designate may be helpful in coordinating a group viewing of the webinar and facilitate its use as a training tool. A group's learning may be enriched if a seasoned adoption practitioner participates to share his/her knowledge and experience.

Using the Webinar as a Learning Opportunity

Planning Your Session

It is up to you or your agency to determine when and where the viewing will take place and who will be involved. The agency may decide that staff in all roles should view the webinar, but might also select individuals in each role to view the webinar subsequently engage in training their peers.

As you prepare to set up this learning opportunity on openness in adoption (for yourself or for your peers), there are some things you need to know, collect and prepare that will enhance your own or the group's learning experience.

Prepare as much as possible before the day of the webinar viewing/training session. Prior to the session:

- Find and book an appropriate meeting room
- Set up a laptop connected to an overhead projector and a good sound system. Test to ensure that you can access and play the webinar on the OACAS website (www.oacas.org/adoptionopenness) and that the sound is working. (If you will be viewing the webinar on your own, ensure the sound on your computer is working).
- Familiarize yourself with the Frequently Asked Questions and other resources found on the OACAS website at www.oacas.org/adoptionopenness. Check out the other resources mentioned at the end of this guide.



- Consider having copies of the PowerPoint slides and Frequently Asked Questions available for participants to review during the webinar viewing.

Once the preceding has been confirmed and completed, the webinar viewing can take place.

The time required to complete the viewing will be contingent on where your organization is at with understanding and applying openness as it relates to Bill 179. The following highlights some approximate timeframes to consider:

For viewing of the theoretical presentation (without interruption)	30 mins
For viewing of the theoretical presentation and following up with guided questions and group discussion (see next section)	30 mins - 1.5 hours
For viewing of the entire webinar (without interruption)	2 hours
For viewing of the entire webinar and following up with guided questions and group discussion	2.5 - 3 hours

Day of the Webinar Viewing

As mentioned earlier, while it is up to each organization to decide on the amount of time that can be allotted for the session, groups and individuals are highly encouraged to budget three hours so that they have sufficient time to watch the full webinar and engage in interactive discussions that will support the transfer of learning into practice. Here are some recommendations and guiding questions that can be useful for sessions where there is sufficient time for reflection and discussion.

- After viewing slide 10, ask the group to reflect on how the agency has been practicing openness. (*How did we practice/implement openness prior to Bill 179?*)
- After viewing slide 15, ask the group to summarize what Bill 179 is and is not (*Why is it important to identify what Bill 179 is not?*)
- After viewing slides 17-21, ask the group to reflect on and discuss the two paths to openness orders (for children or youth with and without an access order) by sharing real case scenarios. (*What has been your experience with facilitating openness orders for a child or youth who previously had an access order? Which aspects of the paths have been easier to follow and which were more challenging?*)
- After viewing slides 22-23, ask the group to share real case scenarios where they've had some challenges in talking about openness applications with potential adoptive families. (*Based on your experience, what tips do you have for engaging in such conversations with adoptive parents? What has worked well? What lessons have you learned?*)



- e) After viewing slide 24, ask the group to share their thoughts about the new subrule (*How has/will the new subrule in Family Law Rules impact our practice?*)
- f) After viewing slide 27, ensure that everyone understands that the definition of the terms meaningful and beneficial are in the legal context.
- g) After viewing slide 28, ask the group to discuss real cases where openness orders and/or agreements were made (*Let's discuss some of your cases where an openness arrangement was made. How did the process go? How was it decided that an agreement would be used versus an order and vice-versa? What are some of the lessons learned?*)
- h) If you or the group watches the recorded panel discussion, consider pausing the webinar at the following times after questions are answered by the panel:

00:43:55	Question #2 on slide 33. What benefits have you observed from openness arrangements?
00:51:22	Question #3 on slide 34. What have been the parameters of the openness arrangements you have been involved with? What was the rationale for those particular parameters vs. other possibilities? If this was before the legislative changes, would you do anything differently now? What insights, if any, did you get from the panellists' comments in relation to this question?
01:15:00	Question #6 on slide 37. What lessons can you share from your own experience in talking to adoptive parents about their child's contact with birth families through social media?
01:22:21	Question #7 on slide 38. How have you involved the Office of the Children's Lawyer in the past in openness in adoption arrangements? Given the panellists' comments, how might you change your practice of involving the OCL?
01:34:40	Question #8 on slide 39. Given the panellists' comments about the roles of the adoption worker, the adoptive parent and the foster parent in speaking to children and youth about openness, how, if at all, might you change your practice with regard to speaking to the child or youth about openness pre-adoption?
01:45:10	Question #10 on slide 41. How do the panellists' comments about resolving conflicts between the clinical and the legal perspective in adoption resonate with your own experience?



- i) At the end of the webinar, ask the participants if there are any areas where they require further clarification. Refer them to the FAQs as needed.
- j) Advise the group that learning materials can be accessed on OACAS's website:
www.oacas.org/adoptionopenness
- k) Let us know via adoptionopenness@oacas.org about any unresolved questions that remain after you view the webinar. OACAS will do its best to answer them or connect you with someone who can.

Organizing a Panel in Your Community

Choosing your panellists

If your organization decides to host its own local or regional panel on this topic, here are a few guiding principles that can assist you.

Typically, a panel is comprised of 3-9 members. The length of time you allot to the panel discussion may determine the number of panellists that you invite – it is important to schedule enough time for each person to share their perspective on the issues of concern. Some recommendations of the type of panel members to include might be:

- Adoption Supervisor and/or Adoption Worker
- Adoptive Parent (with an openness order/agreement)
- Private Adoption Practitioner
- Judge
- Children's Lawyer
- Legal Counsel (representing the organization, birth or adoptive parents)
- Foster Parent

Including a variety of perspectives on a panel makes for a more interesting learning experience. How the contact and invitation is made with the potential panellists is at the discretion of the organization.

Preparing for the panel

Depending on the desired focus and depth for your panel, it is a good idea to **contact your panellists** several weeks ahead of time to articulate what you need from them. Based on the needs of the learners in your agency/region, **develop a list of questions** to which the panel will be asked to respond. Make it clear to your panellists that you want the audience to take away clear, concrete ideas as well as relevant case examples that will bring more relevance to the theory of the new legislation. For your consideration, a list of questions for panel members is attached as an appendix at the end of this document.



It is important to **select a moderator** for the panel who is familiar with the content area and is comfortable speaking in front of a large group. The moderator will play the role of posing questions to the panel members, probing for elaboration of responses, asking panellists to respond to comments made by fellow panel members and monitoring the time. If desired, the panel discussion can be moderated as an informal chat that allows for unplanned comments and questions (as was done in the OACAS webinar) or it can be made more formal.

It is a good idea to give the panellists a **time limit for answering the questions**, and advise them that they will be cued during the panel discussion to wrap up their answers. In addition, you may want to identify specific panellists to answer particular questions and you may also want to bring your panellists together ahead of time through a teleconference or in-person meeting. This can be a good way of familiarizing the panellists with one another, and with the questions that will be posed, as well as ensuring complementary remarks and reducing duplication of comments. Preparing the panel, however, is at the organization's discretion. In order to properly introduce your panel members, be sure to obtain a two-sentence biographical statement from each of your panellists.

It is important to think through and organize the **audio-visual equipment** for the panel. You may need microphones for the moderator and panellists and video-recording equipment if you will be video-taping it. Also, consider setting up roaming or standing microphones for the audience if you will be taking questions or comments from participants.

Related to this last point, take the time to plan if and **how you will take questions from the audience**. You might open it up to anyone from the audience to pose a question or you could require that questions be written on a piece of paper and handed to the moderator for screening, selection and posing to the panellists.

On the day of the panel

Ask your panellists to meet one hour before the panel starts. Use the time to review how the panel will be moderated, what the question and speaker line-up will be and to go over any last-minute questions or changes. If you are video-taping the panel, use this time to do a camera test and ensure that everyone is positioned so that they can be viewed on video.

During the panel

Start by giving an overview of the panel topic: set the stage for your panellists based on what you know they're going to discuss. At this time, you might engage your audience by asking them a few questions about their experience with the topic that they can answer with a show of hands (*e.g., How many of you have been involved with facilitating an openness arrangement? How many of you have been involved with determining the parameters of an openness order for a former Crown ward with access?*). Introduce your panellists with the short bios you gathered.



Start the panel by asking a question from your prepared list. Depending on the strategy you've planned for taking questions from the audience, pause throughout the panel discussion to solicit questions from the audience.

Following up

At the end of the panel discussion, remind people about the adoption openness materials that can be found on the OACAS website at www.oacas.org/adoptionopenness. Invite comment and critique of the panel presentation by circulating an evaluation form.

Other Available Learning Resources

Here's a list of websites where your organization can find additional learning resources.

- a. Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies <http://www.oacas.org/childwelfare/adopt.htm>
- b. Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Adoption Section
<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/adoption/index.aspx>
- c. Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Raising Expectations, Recommendations of the Expert Panel on Infertility and Adoptions
<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/infertility/report/index.aspx>
- d. Presentation on Openness to Foster Parents Society fosterparentssociety.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Bill179WorkshopWSlides.pdf
- e. Adoption Council of Ontario (ACO) <http://www.adoption.on.ca>
- f. Adoption Council of Canada (ACC) <http://www.adoption.ca>
- g. Aboriginal Children: Maintaining Connections in Adoption by Jeannine Carriere and Sandra Scarth. Canadian Child Welfare Portal <http://cwrp.ca/publications/1019>



Appendix 1: Panel Questions

1. We have a shared understanding of the purpose of openness. Openness in adoption promotes permanency while at the same time ensuring continuity of relationships, community and culture.
 - a) What about openness is new under Bill 179? How is it different than pre-Bill 179 openness?
 - b) What legal challenges are there with the new provisions for openness?
 - c) Can you talk to us about the continuum of openness and the different forms that openness can take?
2. What are the benefits of openness: For the child? For the birth family? For the adoptive parent?
3. Given the different types of openness in adoption, what are some examples of circumstances in which the different types of openness would work best?

And...

How do you determine and make recommendations about what kind of openness along the continuum is appropriate for each situation?

- *If necessary, probe on:* What is the role of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) (before court) and mediation (throughout court) in considering openness and the best interest of the child?
4. The new provisions in the CFSA now require agencies to consider openness when planning all adoptions. Children's aid societies must consider with whom the child has had a meaningful and beneficial relationship. In light of the definitions of the terms meaningful and beneficial previously shared, how have you been interpreting these definitions in cases you've dealt with?
 - *If necessary, probe on:* What factors will Judges consider when deciding whether relationships preserved through openness will impair a child's adoption plan? What concerns will inform decisions?
 - What are the implications of Bill 179 regarding the Court in decision-making?
 5. We know that in this information age, social media is a quickly evolving phenomenon. Everything and everyone seems to be openly accessible online. How can adoptive parents be prepared and supported to handle situations where a child or members of a birth family use social media to contact each other, when this type of contact is not specified in an existing openness arrangement?
 6. When does the discussion about openness begin?
 - When and how to involve the OCL?
 7. Conversations about openness pre- and post- adoption look very different. What are the roles of the adoption worker, the adoptive and the foster parent in talking to the child about openness pre- and post-adoption?



8. Reflecting on your past experiences where differences in opinion were evident (clinical practice vs. legal), how were these situations resolved?
 - What are some best practice measures to utilize when discussing and determining openness as it relates to the child's best interest?

