

# **Research Briefing on the “Contact after Adoption” study Conducted by Dr. Elsbeth Neil *et al.*, University of East Anglia.**

## **Introduction**

This project set out to find out how post adoption contact plans between adopted children, adoptive parents, and the adult birth relatives of these children were working out. We studied a group of children who were placed for adoption when under the age of four years, following them up about seven years after they moved to their adoptive family. Seventy percent of the children had been adopted from the care system. We wanted to explore what all three parties felt about any contact that was taking place between the birth family and the adoptive family. We also wanted to find out whether this post adoption contact was having any effect on children’s development. We looked specifically at two different types of contact, focussing on contact with adult birth relatives (mostly parents and grandparents). One type was face-to-face contact where the adopted child has meetings with their birth relatives. The other type was indirect contact – where letters and sometimes photos or cards are exchanged between adopted parents and birth relatives, via the adoption agency. We interviewed 62 adoptive parents, 72 birth relatives and 43 adopted children. We also asked our participants to fill in some psychological questionnaires. The data were collected between 2002 and 2004. The research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Outputs from the study have been independently peer reviewed.

## **Key Findings**

1. Almost all children felt they were loved and that they belonged in their adoptive family. This was true regardless of the contact arrangements with birth relatives.
2. Some children experienced problems outside the family (usually at school) related to teasing from other people about being adopted.
3. Children in this study did not yet have a full understanding of adoption. Many children were curious about their birth family. A wide range of feelings (both positive and negative) were expressed.
4. Children generally accepted whatever contact they had as normal and ordinary. Children involved in ongoing contact arrangements generally valued the contact. If they expressed any dissatisfaction this was usually related to contact that was not happening.
5. About three-quarters of children were doing well in terms of their emotional and behavioural development. Children who had problems in these areas tended to be those who were older at placement and had more difficult backgrounds.
6. No differences were found between children who had face-to-face contact and those who did not in terms of their emotional and behavioural development. Neither did the openness of adoptive parents relate to children's emotional and behavioural development.
7. Adoptive parent satisfaction with face-to-face contact was generally high, with adoptive parents usually reporting that this contact was either positive or neutral/unproblematic for their child. They often described meetings as being low-key and like seeing a distant relative.
8. Adoptive parent satisfaction with indirect contact was more mixed, with many adoptive parents finding letters hard to write and finding the response (or lack of response) from birth relatives disappointing. Children were not necessarily being included in letter contact.
9. Adoptive parents varied in terms of how open they were to talking and thinking about adoption, and understanding every party’s perspective on adoption. Adoptive parents

involved in face-to-face contact tended to be more open than those involved in indirect contact.

10. About half of birth relatives had accepted the adoption and supported the adoptive parents. The remaining birth relatives were either resigned or angry. Grandparents were more likely to show positive acceptance than birth parents, and birth relatives involved in face-to-face contact were also more likely to show positive acceptance compared to those who had no face-to-face contact.
11. Almost all birth relatives felt that having any form of contact was better than having no contact. Contact could be a very mixed experience of birth relatives however. Some birth relatives did not keep up meetings or respond to letters for both practical and emotional reasons.
12. Contact plans made at the time of placement had often changed in the years following adoption and both increases and decreases in contact were found.
13. Both face-to-face and indirect contact worked best where both the adoptive parents and birth relatives could empathise with each other, think about the child's needs, and relate to each other in a constructive and collaborative way.
14. Where indirect contact was planned, a one-off meeting between the adoptive parents and birth relatives was usually highly valued by both parties, and increased the chance that indirect contact would be sustained over the years.

## Limitations of the study

The study included only children adopted under the age of four most of whom were adopted from the care system; the results will not necessarily apply to all adopted children such as those placed at older ages, babies relinquished for adoption, children in intercountry adoptions, and children adopted by relatives. The sample of birth parents and adoptive parents involved in indirect contact arrangements may not reflect the views of all people where indirect contact was the plan; our sample was probably biased towards people who have attempted to sustain some contact overtime. The study did not include large enough numbers in order to look at the impact of contact taking account of all the other factors that can affect how well children get on. The study followed up children in middle childhood and it is important to find out what longer term impact have contact might have, especially when the children become teenagers and young adults.

## Implications for practice.

- **Consider contact on a case-by-case basis.** The study shows that contact in its various forms can work out in a variety of ways; it can have benefits for everyone involved, but can also be disappointing or emotionally challenging. Children's contact with birth relatives should be carefully considered on a case by case basis. The type of contact considered should be based on this individual assessment, and views that face-to-face contact is "difficult" and letterbox contact is "easy" need to be questioned.
- **Assess relevant factors.** When considering contact there should be a focus on what is hoped to be achieved for the child (for example to provide them with information they can use to make sense of their identity). The strengths and limitations of the individuals involved, and how these may change over time, should be considered.
- **Support and review contact plans.** Contact arrangements often change after the adoption, and systems to review and support contact should be in place.