

Accepting and adjusting to the loss of a child to adoption – the feelings of birth relatives six years on

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How does it feel to have had a child of your own adopted into another family? How are birth parents and grandparents affected by this experience? In the UK children can be adopted without the consent of their parents (if the parents cannot provide adequate care and legal conditions are met). Some form of post adoption contact is usually planned between the adoptive family and the birth family, either by letter or regular face-to-face meetings.

The 'Contact after Adoption' study set out to find out how post adoption contact arrangements were working out from the perspective of all in the adoption triangle. All of the children were placed for adoption whilst under four years old and the majority (around 75%) were adopted against parental wishes. In the birth relative study, we explored how birth family members cope with the loss of their child. We examined the factors affecting birth relatives' ability to take part in post adoption contact arrangements and their acceptance of the adoption.

We interviewed 72 adult birth relatives approximately six years after their child's adoption. Two thirds of these interviews were with birth parents and the rest with grandparents. Qualitative analysis of the ways people can accept and adjust to the loss of their child revealed three main patterns: positive acceptance, resignation, and anger and resistance.

Positive acceptance.

In this group, birth relatives accepted that the child was now also part of another family. They expressed positive feelings about the adoptive parents and the new life their child was enjoying. They were realistic about their current and future role in their child's life. On balance they felt that however hard or unwanted the adoption had been, things had worked out for the best. One young woman with learning disabilities, who had her baby taken away from her because of concerns about neglect explained:

(At first) It was horrible... It was really heartbreaking knowing that he won't be mine any more... But now that he's adopted I'm really happy that he's happy...I don't mind when Robert says to her 'mum'...."

Resignation

Some people felt very unhappy about the adoption but they resigned themselves to the loss. They saw themselves as worthless and unable to help or protect their child. Their current feelings about the adoption were marked by sadness, guilt, and anxiety about their child. Many people were unable to keep up contact with their child after adoption, because of an inability to take action and feelings of having nothing good to offer their child:

"I keep saying I'm going to [write a letter], but I just can't pluck up the courage ... What sort of things do you include in a letter to your own child?... how much can you say to a little child that it's not their fault?"

Anger and resistance

Anger about the adoption was felt by many birth relatives in the early stages. In some cases this lessened or dissipated over time. However there were some people whose anger remained the dominant emotion several years later, and who continued to show strong feelings of resistance even though they knew their child's adoption could not be changed. They expressed the view that although the adoptive parents were the legal parents, they - were the *real* parents. They were often dismissive of the child's relationship with adoptive parents. Anger was directed outwards to family and friends, adoptive parents, social workers and judges. One mother expressed:

"I mean the letters that we write now, I'm not allowed to refer to myself as mummy, I'm allowed to refer to myself as mummy Leanne, which is total and utter [rubbish]... [The adoptive parents], they are not short of [money] ... Material things can't buy you love... and if that's all they've got to offer them, they're better off with me."

Explaining acceptance

We found that birth relatives of relinquished children (as opposed to those of children adopted from care) were *not* more likely to positively accept the adoption. This is likely to be because our interviewees included members of the wider birth family (fathers, grandparents) who may have supported the adoption plan. It was also clear from interviews that mothers who relinquished children did so in a context of social stigma and often with much self-blame and guilt attached to the decision. The vast majority of single mothers who give birth in the UK keep their children and receive social support to enable them to do so.

Being a grandparent (as opposed to being a parent) was associated with positive acceptance. Although grandparents expressed similar pain around the adoption, they often had less anger (they were more likely to be in agreement with the adoption plan) and experienced less guilt and shame. They usually had less mental health issues than birth parents. Some, especially those having regular face-to-face contact, still enjoyed some continuation of their role as grandparent.

The type of post adoption contact birth relatives were having was associated with acceptance of the adoption. We found that those people having face-to-face contact with the child and adoptive parents were more likely to positively accept the adoption than those having letter contact (this was true for parents and grandparents). Birth relatives valued face-to-face contact because they could see for themselves the type of life their child was living. They were often reassured of their welfare, saw the reality of their new attachments and had some continuation of a role in the children's lives. Letter contact could work well too, but many birth relatives found this a difficult way to communicate.

For those having letter contact, having a one-off meeting with the adoptive parents (as opposed to not having a meeting) also seemed to help birth relatives to positively accept the adoption. The vast majority of these birth family members who had met the adoptive parents felt positive about them and were reassured that the children would be well looked after and told about them in the future.

This study suggests that ongoing face-to-face post adoption contact and one off meetings with adopters can improve outcomes for birth relatives. This challenges practitioners to think beyond the feelings and behaviours that non-consenting birth relatives may show at the time of adoption, and to accept the concept that people can and do change. However whilst contact clearly can affect birth relatives' adjustment, in some cases more than this is needed to bring about change. The study suggests that more support needs to be offered to the birth relatives of adopted children, to help adjustment to their experience and to help people participate usefully in post adoption contact.

References

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