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Contact arrangements for adopted children: what can be learned from research?

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Summary

This paper sets out messages from research that can inform the Department for Education’s consultation about birth family contact for adopted children. It draws on research evidence from our many studies carried out at the University of East Anglia, and from our reviews of the wider research literature. We argue that research into post-adoption contact shows that the experience of contact as reported by adopted children, birth relatives and adoptive parents is variable; contact can be positive, neutral, or negative and the quality of contact is more important than the type. In most cases the broad outcomes of adoption for the child (for example in terms of the child's overall development and the success of the placement) are not greatly affected by either the presence or absence of contact. However contact may have an impact on more adoption specific aspects of development (for example children's understanding of their background and why they were adopted), and contact may be wanted and valued by adopted children, birth relatives, and adoptive parents. The role that contact with birth relatives can play in helping adopted children manage issues of attachment and family belonging, loss, separation and identity should be considered on a case-by-case basis. The current legislation allows for this individualised decision-making as contact is neither promoted nor discouraged. Hence we argue that there is no need to change legislation in the direction of restricting contact. We have come across many excellent examples of professional practice in relation to contact, but we agree that some contact arrangements do not work in children's best interests and there is room for improvement. We outline suggestions for changes in professional practice to address these issues.
Introduction

1. In July 2012 the Department for Education published a consultation document calling for views about contact arrangements for children. This document addressed issues relating to children in care, and children who were adopted or for whom adoption is the plan. In this paper, we outline how our research at UEA can inform proposals relating to adopted children and those for whom adoption is the plan.

2. In the government's document the argument is put forward that the nature of contact arrangements should in all cases be determined by the needs of the child and what is in their best interests and that contact arrangements should be purposeful, involve all relevant people at the planning stage, contact should be realistic and in the case of adoption, reflect the changing realities when a change is made to the care plan from exploring possibilities of a child returning home to placing the child permanently with a new family. We agree with these suggestions and recognise that in some cases adopted children's contact arrangements fall short of these ideals.

3. In the forward to the government's document, Martin Narey, the government adviser on adoption, expresses his view that "contact harms children too often". A number of proposals are put forward for consideration in relation to contact arrangements once adoption is the plan. Generally speaking these proposals aim to meet the goals (summarised in paragraph 2 above) through more restrictive policies in relation to contact in adoption, these including introducing a presumption of no contact at the point a placement order is made for children, the requirement for birth parents to have to seek permission to apply for a contact order at the placement order stage, a presumption of no contact when an adoption order is made, the possibility of making a specific 'no contact' order when an adoption order is made - even when contact is planned, and the introduction of additional barriers (there are already legal barriers in existence) to prevent birth parents from applying for contact orders after adoption.

4. Here at the University of East Anglia we have over 25 years empirical work exploring the situations of children who are adopted. Our programme of research has included:
   - a survey of the interim outcomes for over a thousand children in permanent placements, some of whom were followed up as teenagers and young adults\(^1\);  

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• a study of over 400 adopted adults who had looked for or been found by birth relatives\(^2\);
• a detailed follow-up study of the views of the adoptive parents of over 200 children, exploring accounts of their adoptees’ longer-term wellbeing \(^3\),
• a longitudinal study of over 60 adopted children, their birth relatives and their adoptive parents exploring the impact of post-adoption contact on all three parties (the third stage of this study looking at how contact is working as the adopted young people enter adulthood is currently in progress) \(^4\);
• a study exploring support for face-to-face contact arrangements, including interviews with the adoptive parents and birth relatives of over 50 children \(^5\).
• a study of 73 birth parents and grandparents going through the adoption process, exploring people’s experiences of adoption and of adoption support services \(^6\).

Through this extensive body of research we have heard from hundreds of adoptive parents, birth relatives and adopted children and adults about their experiences of adoption and of having or not having contact after adoption.

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\(^4\) The “Contact after Adoption” study directed by Elsbeth Neil. This study is looking at the contact arrangements for children adopted under the age of 4. Children, adoptive parents and birth relatives were followed up 6 years post placement, and (in progress) 16 years post placement. For more information about findings and publications visit (www.uea.ac.uk/swp/research/centre/contactafteradoption)


5. In addition to our own programme of research we have also carried out extensive reviews of the broader research looking at contact issues. Research into contact issues in adoption cannot definitively answer all questions about this topic, but across a range of studies a number of key themes have emerged which throw light on some of the questions raised in the government’s paper, and these are summarised below.

How many children have contact with birth relatives after adoption?

6. It is important to first look at the type and amount of contact that adopted children currently have with their birth relatives. The government paper argues that there should be far less contact between the child and their birth family after adoption to reflect the change in the plan for the child, and our research indicates that this is almost always the case. Our survey of a cohort of 168 children placed for adoption under the age of 4 showed a minority of children (11%) were planned to have no contact with birth relatives. The most usual contact plan was for the child to have letterbox contact where letters were sent through the adoption agency. This type of contact was planned for over 80% of children, most commonly with the birth mother, and usually once or twice a year. 17% of children had a plan for face-to-face contact with an adult birth relative (in all cases this contact was to be supervised by adoptive parents, and, in some cases, social workers), though it was just 9% of children who had a plan to see a birth parent. Almost all of these face-to-face contact arrangements were to happen infrequently (most usually once or twice a year) and often they were very brief (lasting an hour or two). In our more recent study of face-to-face contact arrangements which included a broader age range, contact meetings with adult birth relatives also happened mostly once or twice a year, in almost all cases the adoptive parents and/or supervising worker was present.

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7. Children adopted above the age of four may have somewhat higher levels of face-to-face contact compared to the young placed children studied in the “Contact after Adoption” project.

8. A number of studies have found that plans for post-adoption contact often change after the child is adopted, and there is often a falling off of contact overtime. The reasons why contact stops are varied and include: concerns about the quality of contact and the impact on the child; the discomfort of adoptive parents with contact; the withdrawal of birth relatives from contact; the child’s decision to discontinue contact; contact “petering out” through lack of support by professionals. Letterbox contact in particular can be difficult to maintain overtime because of the complexities of communicating in this particular medium.

**What are the reasons why adoptions have become more open than in the past?**

9. In the past it was common for adopted children (here we are talking about children voluntarily given up for adoption as babies) to have no contact with their birth families after adoption. In general terms most of these adoptions were successful in terms of adopted people making stable and loving relationships in their new families, and in terms of the adopted person’s general development. However some adopted people in these "closed" adoptions would have liked to know about or have had contact with their birth family, and a significant proportion of adopted people seek out more information about or contact with their birth family once they are adults. For most such people, finding out about or meeting birth family members is about trying to resolve issues relating to their identity as an adopted person, and to find the answer to questions about why they were adopted. Research findings such as these, and the views expressed by many adopted adults themselves, have influenced practice in the direction of allowing children more

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contact with birth relatives after adoption, the intended purpose of such contact being to provide information for the adoptive parents and children which will help the child understand why they were adopted and about their background, preventing the type of unanswered questions that adopted people have had in the past.

10. Most children adopted today have been in care; such children have either experienced abuse and neglect or have been considered to be at risk of such maltreatment. The long-term impact of having contact or not having contact on this group of adopted children is not yet fully known; most research has followed up children during their childhood but not through to adulthood – our current research study (due for completion in Autumn 2013) will contribute to filling this gap.

11. Another important reason why adoptions now include more contact than in the past is because older placed children can have significant feelings for birth relatives and wish to remain in contact with them. The importance of contact to older adopted children has been illustrated in a number of studies\(^\text{11}\), though these studies show that children may wish to see some birth relatives but not others, and that contact, even when wanted, can be a mixed experience. In one of our studies\(^\text{12}\) we followed up 51 children placed in permanent placements, most of whom were over the age of three when placed. The follow up was 10 to 15 years after placement, and 28 young people were interviewed as were 51 adoptive parents/permanent foster carers. These young people had a range of contact experiences, including no contact, and their views about their contact arrangements were similarly varied. Children who had remained in touch with birth relatives were often described as having "a bumpy ride", but in general they emerged as young adults with a sense of belonging in their new family and a realistic view of their birth family e.g. one young person said "The contact with my mum has helped me see what she is really like... I don't hate my mum, I suppose I love her...[but] I'm glad I didn't stay with her". Of the children whose contact with birth family members was severed many had chosen to resume contact at later stages. This seemed to be a helpful experience where young people had done this with the support of their foster carers or adoptive parents, but it was often unhelpful where the young person took matters into their own hands "bursting out" of their permanent placement to find their birth family. Many of these young people had appeared for a while not to want or need contact with their birth family,


but their feelings about their birth family were unresolved, fuelling the desire for contact in adolescence. Research findings such as these suggest that another important purpose of contact, especially for older placed children, is to enable children to maintain important relationships; however contact in such circumstances is complex and requires careful management and will not be suitable for all children even when they wish for it.

**Does contact affect placement breakdown rates or children’s developmental outcomes?**

12. For children adopted beyond early infancy, including those who are adopted from the care system, adoption is often very successful. Adoption however does not work in every case (approximately 20% of such adoptions will breakdown). Even when placements last, developmental problems that children may have, especially those caused by early abuse or neglect, can persist. It is important to consider what impact post-adoption contact with birth family members might have on whether adoptions breakdown and on how well children develop after adoption.

13. There is clear evidence from research that the success or otherwise of adoption is related to the age at which the child is placed, the quality and continuity of care he or she received before being adopted, and the quality of care in the adoptive family. In comparison, there is little evidence that birth family contact has any great impact on broad outcomes of adoption such as placement breakdown, relationships with adoptive parents and children's general development: the other factors mentioned earlier are more important predictors. For example in our study of 1,165 permanent placements, contact with birth family members had a positive or neutral effect on placement stability. In our "Contact after Adoption" study which followed up 62 children in middle childhood, children who had face-to-face contact with an adult birth relatives were doing no better or worse in terms of their emotional and behavioural development compared to children who did not have such contact (this group included children having indirect “letterbox contact” and children having no contact), and adoptive parents did not feel that either indirect or face-to-face contact negatively affected their relationship with their child. In our "Supporting Direct Contact after Adoption" study we interviewed the adoptive parents of 55 children, all of whom had had direct contact with a birth

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family member after adoption. Although many adoptive parents found contact challenging in various ways, virtually no adoptive parents felt that the contact had negatively affected their relationship with the child, and about half of adoptive parents believed that direct contact had brought about, or would lead to, benefits in their relationship with the adopted child e.g. one mother said “I think it actually really makes [the children] feel more part of our family... Every contact we come away feeling more secure really.”

14. In general therefore, the evidence is that neither the presence nor absence of birth family contact as an isolated factor is likely to have any major determining effect on broad outcomes of adoption as described above; these outcomes are driven by other factors. There may be individual cases however where successful contact could “make” a placement (for example if this helps an older child to move on psychologically and settle in their new family) or where unsuccessful contact could “break” the placement (for example where contact is very disturbing of children’s emotions and behaviour, or where birth relatives undermine the adoptive parents). It is important to also consider whether contact is wanted, valued and enjoyed by the various parties and where there is no evidence that contact is harming children, these factors may be reason alone to promote contact at an appropriate level.

What benefits or challenges of contact are experienced by adopted children, birth relatives, and adoptive parents?

15. How well contact works out, particularly in terms of the experiences of the child, is hugely varied. For example, in our recent “Supporting Direct Contact” study the challenges of contact as identified by adoptive parents included managing children’s feelings and behaviours before, during and after contact, managing relationships with other people involved in contact (especially birth family members), managing the actual contact event (in particular the difficulties for children and birth relatives in relating to each other in a natural and friendly way when meetings were formal and infrequent), protecting the boundaries of the adoptive family, and managing adoptive parents own emotions about contact. On the positive side the main benefits of contact as seen by adoptive parents were children being allowed to maintain relationships that were important to them, gaining information about the child’s past and understanding their birth family, and strengthening adoptive family relationships.

16. The children interviewed in middle childhood in our “Contact after Adoption” study were generally positive about any contact they were involved in; they

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mostly enjoyed hearing from or seeing birth relatives. Few reported contact to be stressful, and most accepted whatever level of contact they had as roughly the right amount, suggesting only modest changes. Children who expressed negative views of contact in the main were unhappy about arrangements that had stopped, or about birth relatives who they did not see or hear from. Views from children in other research studies echo some of these themes, but children placed at older ages or interviewed when they are older tend to express more mixed views and adopted children and young people’s feelings about their birth family and need for information will vary with age. Our current follow up of adopted young people as they enter adulthood will be an important source of information about their long-term experience of contact.

17. In our research with birth relatives we have found that the vast majority of birth relatives value having post-adoption contact with the adopted child. The main benefits perceived by birth relatives are gaining information about the welfare of the child, and feeling able to contribute to the child's life after adoption in some way, for example by providing information. Although birth relatives value these factors, contact can also be emotionally challenging because it can bring back feelings of loss and because the reality of the child's membership of another family must be faced. Both letterbox and face-to-face contact raise questions for birth relatives about their role in the child's life (which in almost all cases is a much diminished and often undefined role), and about how they are expected to behave. A minority of birth relatives do not want to have contact with the adopted child after adoption.

What factors can help understand when contact is likely to work well in terms of the child's interests?

18. Our research has identified factors that help predict whether contact is likely or not to be in the child's best interests. Contact is most likely to benefit children where birth relatives support the child's placement in the adoptive

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family and where adoptive parents have an open attitude about adoption and can empathise with birth family members. These attitudes of both adoptive parents and birth relatives are not necessarily fixed and anxieties about contact and about the child’s “other” family may be at their peak at a pre-placement stage. Both adopters and birth relatives are sometimes more able to accept each other following the finality of the adoption order. Contact is a relationship based process and the relationship between an adoptive parent and their child, the child in their birth relatives, and the adoptive parents and the birth relatives are all crucial to understanding the dynamics of contact20.

19. The fewer other complications there are in the child’s placement, the more likely contact is to work in a straightforward way. So, for example, in our "Supporting Direct Contact" study, contact was significantly more likely to work well where adoptive parents had an open attitude, where the child did not have emotional or behavioural problems, where the child was under two when placed for adoption, and where the contact meeting did not include a birth relative who had abused or severely neglected the child. One reason why younger placed children can find face-to-face contact manageable is because such children often do not have an established relationship with the parent or grandparent with whom they have contact. This means that actual contact meetings can be quite low key emotionally for the child and indeed for the adoptive parents as meetings tend to confirm the child’s place in the adoptive family; in such cases the purpose of contact is not so much to maintain an established relationship, but to allow for an ongoing exchange of information between adoptive parents, children and birth relatives. In our "Supporting Direct Contact" study the children were adopted across a range of ages from 0-8 years (their average age at placement was 3.7 years) so children had spent longer in their birth families and some had established relationships with birth relatives, and 45% of children had emotional and behavioural problems at the time of follow up. Direct contact for these children was working very well in 45% of cases, and 55% of cases outcomes were more mixed and some unresolved problems were apparent; in a small minority of cases these problems were extensive and the value of contact for the child appeared dubious. The view put forward in the government’s paper therefore that contact is only likely to be appropriate for older children is somewhat at odds with research findings which suggest that contact can be more straightforward for younger placed children. For older placed children, contact arrangements are more complex and can result in behaviours that are difficult to manage. Where such children wish to continue having contact with birth relatives the relative costs and benefits must be weighed up of either

keeping the contact going in some form and trying to make it work versus overruling the child's wishes and feelings (which could possibly result in children attempting unmediated contact with birth relatives in adolescence)\(^{21}\).

20. Both of our contact studies at UEA, in common with many other research studies, have identified a quality of an openness of attitude on the part of adoptive parents, which includes a willingness to think and talk about the meaning of adoption and about the child's birth family with the child, and to value the child's birth heritage, characteristics that have been called 'adoptive communicative openness'\(^{22}\). A number of studies from the 1960s and through to the present day suggest that qualities such as these are an important aspect of adoptive parenting. In our “Contact after Adoption” study we found a relationship between this type of openness and more open contact arrangements. More ‘communicatively open’ adoptive parents were willing to promote higher levels of contact such as direct contact and were able to manage the complexities of such contact when they believed it to be in their child's best interests to do so. They played a vital role in mediating contact experiences for their children, helping children to be realistic about their birth families and to understand their limitations, and working constructively with birth relatives to ensure that contact arrangements met children's needs.\(^{23}\)

Having face-to-face contact also appeared to help some adoptive parents become more communicatively open with their child, because contact meetings promoted conversations between parent and child and because meeting birth relatives could help adoptive parents to deal with their own fears and anxieties\(^{24}\). One concern we have about a much more restrictive approach to post adoption contact is about the message this could convey to adoptive parents and prospective adoptive parents about adopted children's need for open communication about adoption and acceptance of the child's birth heritage.


\(^{24}\) See also: Von Korff & Grotevant (2011). Contact in adoption and adoptive identity formation: The mediating role of family conversation. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25(3), 393-401). This study found that children who had more communication about adoption with their adoptive parents had better adoptive identity development in adolescent. Direct contact with birth relatives was an important factor in encouraging these parent/child conversations.
21. Our research has also looked at contact from the point of view of birth relatives. Birth relatives can find it very difficult to cope with the pain and stress of losing a child to adoption. Where such feelings mean that birth relatives cannot move to a position of supporting their child’s adoptive placement, this is unhelpful for children and uncomfortable for adoptive parents. We have found however that many birth relatives, including birth parents who have opposed the adoption, can and do make an adjustment towards a position of positively accepting their child’s adoption and supporting the adoptive placement, and that having contact with the child is an important factor in helping birth relatives achieve this adjustment. Another concern we have therefore about a more restrictive policy on post-adoption contact is that this move could potentially create more problems for children through the additional difficulties it may create for birth relatives. In the current day and age, unauthorised contact between children and their birth relatives through the use of social media is of concern and it is important to be wary of creating the very conditions which could drive children or their birth relatives to attempt such contact.

A summary of research evidence, and our views on proposed changes to policy with regard to contact for adopted children.

22. To summarise our overall view about contact, our evidenced based position (and one which most people would surely agree is common sense) is that contact that meets children’s needs should be promoted, and contact does not meet children’s needs should not be promoted. Although the type and frequency of contact needs to be considered, it is most important to consider the quality of any contact arrangements. Contact arrangements must be considered taking account of the individual situation of each child.

23. The current policy position with regard to post-adoption contact reflects this in that there is no duty to promote contact for adopted children, but neither is there a presumption that no contact should occur. Requirements to reconsider contact arrangements at the placement order stage, and the adoption order stage, are already in place. There are already barriers to prevent birth relatives making unhelpful court applications for contact once a child is adopted, and in almost all cases adoptive parents do have the power to adjust or stop contact (it is not our experience that they will hesitate to do so if they believe their child is at risk). Our view therefore is that there is no need for legislative change in the current position. A presumption against contact could tip the balance towards children not having contact where it would be

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beneficial for them to do so, and in some cases where it could harm the child to have no contact.

24. Indeed we are concerned about the suggested proposals about contact for adopted children for a number of other reasons. Firstly we are concerned that if "no contact" becomes the norm in adoption, this could deter professionals from putting children forward for adoption where they consider the child will benefit from birth family contact. Secondly we are concerned that a return to the more closed adoption practices of the past could actually bring about an increase in unmediated and unsolicited contact between children and their birth relatives. Thirdly, we are concerned that a presumption of no contact could create a culture whereby the importance to children of an openness of communication with their adoptive parents about their background and their birth family is downplayed.

Suggestions for improving professional practice in relation to contact.

25. We do however agree that professional practice in relation to contact for children for whom adoption was the plan is variable and in some cases needs to be improved and we make the following suggestions.

- There should be a clear rationale for contact in every case with clarity about the child's needs in relation to attachment and family belonging, loss and adoptive identity, protection from potential harm. The contact plan should be clear about how contact is intended to contribute positively to the meeting of these needs, and what additional means can be put in place to meet children's needs should also be considered (for example the collection and archiving of relevant information the child may want when they are older).

- The contact plan in outline should be driven by this assessment of the child's needs and not by the wishes and feelings of either the birth relatives or the adoptive parents. However as the adoptive parents and the birth relatives are those who will need to enact the contact arrangements, and because the feelings and behaviours of the adults involved are highly relevant to the experience of contact for the child, it is important to assess the strengths and vulnerabilities they may bring to contact and the possible impact of contact on birth relatives and adoptive parents as well as on the child. Adoptive parents, birth relatives and older children should be involved in planning the details of the contact.

- A clear plan to support any intended contact should be mediated by the professionals in consultation with (older) children, prospective adoptive parents and birth relatives and this should address the management of any risks, the support needs of the child, the adoptive parents and birth
relatives, and the importance of constructive relationships between all parties.

- Contact arrangements should be reviewed on a regular basis after adoption, unless adoptive parents are clear that they are happy to take control of arrangements themselves.

- Reviews of post-adoption contact are an important opportunity to assess whether the goals of contact are being met, and to consider any changes that might be necessary in relation to the contact plan or the support arrangements. All contact arrangements are likely to have both benefits and challenges, and a review of contact needs to assess the balance of these to ensure that the latter do not outweigh the former.