

Stage 1 of the 'Contact after Adoption' Research: key findings

Stage one of the 'Contact after Adoption' study involved two strands:

- A questionnaire survey of current practice in relation to contact after adoption
- Interviews with adoptive parents and birth relatives involved in face-to-face post-adoption contact arrangements

The study focused on young children placed for adoption or adopted through ten adoption agencies in 1996-1997. The aims of the research were to find out what arrangements were being made with regard to post-adoption contact (examined in the questionnaire study), and to look at how face-to-face contact arrangements were working out in the early stages of placement (explored in the interview study). All the children were less than four years old at the time of placement. The study was carried out by Beth Neil and was funded by a UEA Ph.D. studentship. Prof June Thoburn supervised the project.

A survey of current UK practice in relation to contact after adoption.

Detailed information about the case histories of 168 children was collected through a postal questionnaire to social workers. The questionnaire study found:

- The most common form of contact planned for children was agency mediated letterbox contact. Such contact was planned for 81% of children, and usually this contact was to happen once or twice a year.
- Only 11% of children had a "closed" adoption where no ongoing contact was planned. However this survey is based on contact plans, not actual contact arrangements, so more research is needed to find out if the numbers of children having no contact increases or decreases over time.
- The backgrounds of most of the children in the research were highly complex and many birth parents had many personal difficulties such as learning difficulties, mental health problems, drug and alcohol problems, and unstable housing. These difficulties may bring about challenges for children, adoptive parents and birth relatives both writing and receiving letters or having contact meetings.
- All types of contact mainly involved birthmothers and/or maternal grandparents. Less than 30% of children had a plan for any contact with their birth father or his relatives. This exclusion of fathers and their families was part of a wider pattern of non-involvement of (and a lack of information about) birthfathers, possibly reflecting negative views of birthfathers by social workers and by birthmothers.
- Face-to-face contact with adult birth relatives was planned much less frequently than letter contact – in only 17% of cases. Less than one in 10 children (9%) had a plan for face-to-face birth parent contact.
- When face-to-face contact was planned this was usually in cases where children were adopted from care. Children relinquished as babies were highly unlikely to have this kind of open adoption, even though their birthparents had far fewer personal difficulties than the parents of children placed from care.

- Of the children who had birth siblings outside of their adoptive family, 44% had contact plans (or the potential for contact via the contact they had with the parent/s or carer/s of such siblings) with all of their siblings, 25% had contact with only some of their siblings, and 31% had no contact with any of their siblings.
- Children were more likely to have a plan for face-to-face contact with siblings who were also looked after or adopted, compared to siblings remaining in the birth family.
- With regard to all forms of post-adoption contact, wide variations in practice between different agencies were noted, suggesting that currently decisions are often being made according to agency values or culture rather than a consideration of each case.

Views of face-to-face contact of adoptive parents and birth relatives.

This interview study focused on children planned to have face-to-face contact with adult birth relatives after adoption. Interviews were carried out with 49 adoptive parents (30 mothers and 19 fathers) and 19 birth relatives (9 mothers, 3 fathers, 5 grandparents, 2 other relatives), and the contact arrangements of 36 children were explored. For 14 children adoptive parents and birth relatives were interviewed; for 16 just the adoptive parents took part; in 1 case just the birth relative took part. About half of the children having face-to-face contact were seeing a birth parent and the other half another relative, in most cases a grandparent. The child's experience of contact, at this point in the research, was looked at through the reports of adoptive parents; the children were (on average) only four years old at the time of interview.

- Contact arrangements were in some cases very frequent, friendly and informal and took place at the home of the adoptive parents or the birth relatives. In other cases contact meetings were as infrequent as once a year and could be quite brief and supervised by a social worker in a neutral setting. Many variations between these two ends of the spectrum were found.
- On average, interviews with adoptive parents and birth relatives took place about two and a half years into the child's placement. Even at this early stage 42% of all contact arrangements had already altered from the original plan. As many arrangements had increased in openness or frequency as had decreased or stopped. These findings indicate that although a starting point for thinking about contact must be found, contact arrangements cannot be set in stone.
- Generally families were happiest with contact when they could move to an arrangement that more closely suited the particular circumstances of their lives.
- The most helpful approach by agencies seemed to be one that supported and empowered participants to find an arrangement that worked for them, rather than a dictating a standard approach.
- Face-to-face contact, even at high levels, was not found to get in the way of the development of the relationship between the adoptive parents and the child.

- Because this group of children had been placed early and had often not lived at home for very long, they generally did not have close relationships with birth relatives at the time of placement. Furthermore, most children, because of their age, had only a very limited understanding of adoption. This meant that for children contact meetings were not emotionally charged and were generally accepted easily and often enjoyed by them.
- In some cases where contact was quite frequent, a relatively close relationship with the birth relative could develop. For example, some children had regular visits with their grandparents and became very fond of them.
- More often however, children were said to enjoy visits (especially when friendly attention and presents were involved) but their adoptive parents felt they were too young to fully understand the significance of the meetings. For example, one adoptive mother said, *“He is fairly excited because he knows he is going to get a present and he is going to play in the sandpit... not necessarily because it is his birthmother but because of the whole event.”*
- Most adoptive parents showed very high levels of empathy for the child and empathy for birth relatives. This could mean that adoptive parents who have such qualities are more likely to agree to open adoption arrangements. Whilst this may be true, there was also evidence that contact itself helped adoptive parents to empathise with children and birth relatives.
- There were a number of ways in which contact seemed to help adoptive parent develop empathy. For example negative fantasies about the birth family could be reduced by actually getting to know them. Contact could eliminate adopter’s fears that birth relatives could threaten their relationship with the child, and so free them up to feel empathy for the birth family. In some cases contact reassured adoptive parents that it was the right thing that they had adopted the child. Although some adoptive parents were quite fearful of the idea of contact with birth relatives in the beginning, when contact happened most felt there were immediate benefits for themselves, as well as the possibility of benefits for the child in the longer term.
- An open and empathic attitude on the part of adoptive parents was the factor most closely related to whether or not contact continued or increased and the satisfaction of all parties with the arrangements.
- Almost all birth relatives really valued being able to see the child.
- Three-quarters of birth relatives showed acceptance and realism in their view of their relationship to the child post-adoption. This was possible when birth relatives had not agreed with or wanted the adoption. Some birth relatives did not fully understand or accept how their role differed from the adoptive parents’ role, and this group included some parents with learning difficulties.
- This position of acceptance and support for the adoptive parents was frequently one that developed over time as relatives felt reassured that the child was OK and that the adoptive parents were nice people.