

The Contact after Adoption study: phase 2

A research study funded by The Nuffield Foundation

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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AIMS OF THIS STUDY

The majority of children adopted today will have a plan for some form of contact with members of their birth family, and contact arrangements can range from letters sent through the adoption agency (letterbox contact) through to face-to-face meetings directly arranged between birth relatives and adoptive families. This is in contrast to adoption arrangements in the past, which usually followed a "closed" model of no contact between the child and the birth family after adoption. The main argument for contact is that it might help adopted children to cope better with issues of loss and identity. But concerns about contact are also common, especially where children have a background of abuse or neglect. The main aim of this study was to provide some research evidence about how different types of contact are experienced by adopted children and their adoptive parents and birth relatives, and to look at if and how contact might affect the adjustment of all three parties especially in terms of dealing with the impact of adoption.

The study began in 1996 with a questionnaire survey of the situations of 168 children from 10 adoption agencies, all of whom had been recently adopted and were *less than 4 years old* at the time of adoption. Ninety percent of children were planned to have some form of contact with birth relatives after adoption. An interview study of families with plans for face-to-face contact then took place, involving adoptive parents and birth relatives of 36 adopted children (we will refer to this phase subsequently as the 'pilot' study).

This second phase of the study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, builds upon and expands this pilot phase. We have followed up the families having face-to-face contact who were interviewed in the pilot phase, this time including interviews with the children. In a similar number of cases we have also explored indirect letter contact, interviewing adopters, birth relatives and adopted children from the original questionnaire sample, and two further agencies, who had experience of this type of contact.

Questions we explored in the research included:

- Had contact progressed according to the plan, or had contact arrangements changed over time?
- How did children, adoptive parents, and birth relatives feel about the contact that they were having?
- Which contact arrangements worked well, and why?
- What did the children feel and understand about their adoption?
- How open were adoptive parents in terms of thinking about and talking with their child about adoption?
- How accepting were birth relatives of the adoption, and how were birth relatives getting on with their lives after the adoption?
- How were children getting on in terms of their emotional and behavioural development, and were there any differences between children having direct contact versus those having indirect contact?

The study was directed by Dr Elsbeth Neil. The researcher on the project was Julie Young. The study was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Families were interviewed between 2002 and 2004.

WHAT RESEARCH METHODS DID WE USE?

- We carried out in-depth interviews with birth relatives and adoptive parents, in almost all cases interviews took place in people's homes.
- We carried out semi structured interviews with children. Interviews included David Brodzinsky's 'Understanding of adoption' scale and a visual map children could use to show their feelings of closeness to birth and adoptive relatives.
- We asked adoptive parents to complete questionnaires about their child's emotional and behavioural development (the Achenbach's Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL), and Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)) and a measure of parenting stress (Abidin's Parenting Stress Index (PSI).)
- We asked birth relatives to complete a questionnaire about their psychological symptoms experienced in the last week (the Derogatis Brief Symptom Inventory -a 53-item self report symptom inventory that can identify an individual's psychological symptom status).

WHO TOOK PART IN THE STUDY?

We interviewed:

- Adoptive parents in 62 families.
- 72 birth relatives from 61 different families. Two thirds were birth parents, and most of the rest were grandparents.
- 43 adopted children from 31 adoptive families

Almost everyone who took part in our study was white. Three children were of minority ethnicity, as were two of the birth parents. In about 70% of cases, the child had been adopted from the care system. The average age the children moved to their adoptive families was 1 year 10 months, and their average age at the time of the study was 8 years (the range was 5-13).

FINDINGS

1. The nature of contact plans

We came across a huge variety of contact arrangements – many children had multiple contact arrangements with various people in their birth family. We divided people into two groups based on the contact they had with adult birth relatives: face-to-face versus indirect contact; it is important to remember there was a lot of variation within these groups.

Face-to-face contact tended to involve birth parents (mothers and fathers) and birth grandparents in roughly equal measures. Face-to-face contact had stopped or been very erratic in 30% of cases but was ongoing (and in many cases had increased) in 70% of cases. Birth relatives were more likely to drop out of contact than adoptive parents. Grandparents and other relatives were more able to maintain contact overtime than birth parents (some of whom died, went missing or decided to stop contact), perhaps because they had fewer life problems than birth parents. Some families had supervised contact at a neutral venue; some families met without supervision in a public place; some

families contacted each other directly and sometimes met at each other's houses. Where contact had been kept up, it had tended to broaden out to include more birth relatives e.g. new siblings who had been born, or grandparents as well as birth parents. In many cases contact meetings were happening more often or lasting longer compared to the early days of the placement. In quite a few cases adoptive parents had started to manage contact themselves by contacting the birth family directly, as opposed to going through the adoption agency.

Indirect contact was usually with birth mothers (and fathers if they remained with the mother) – indirect contact with grandparents was uncommon. Almost all indirect contact arrangements went through the adoption agency; the identifying details of adoptive parents and birth relatives remained confidential. Of the 37 children who had a plan for indirect contact, in less than half the cases (15, 40%) was this form of contact ongoing and two-way. In 12 cases the adoptive parents were writing to birth relatives, but were not receiving replies. In 10 cases there was no letterbox contact at all. This figure of only 40% of indirect contact being two-way several years after placement is likely to be an over-estimate as some families chose not to take part because no contact was happening, or they could not be contacted by the adoption agency because no current address was available (in which case, no indirect contact was occurring).

In relation to both types of contact, the frequency of contact tended to be quite low (in almost all cases the contact was between one and four times a year). Some contact arrangements were set up in order to enable children to maintain established relationships, but in most cases the goal of contact was long term: to meet the child's identity needs.

2. Children's feelings about contact

What children said about contact suggests these young placed children took contact with birth relatives for granted – it had been a feature of their life from a young age and they accepted it as normal, and in almost all cases positive. Some children described how contact helped them to feel cared for and not forgotten by their birth relatives. Others welcomed the opportunities to find out about their birth relatives, particularly about their wellbeing. A few focused on the material gains involved, including receiving presents, vouchers, and gifts of money. Children's negative feelings about contact were most commonly in relation to contact they wanted but which did not happen – e.g. if their birth parent did not send a letter, or if they couldn't see their siblings.

Most children who were having face-to-face contact said that they enjoyed the meetings and usually expressed their appreciation simply in terms of it being able *to see* their birth relatives. Some associated contact with a good day out and having fun. The few children who expressed any negative feelings about face-to-face contact usually did so in terms of physical aspects of the meeting, such as the long car journeys involved, rather than the nature of their relationships with their birth relatives. Children seemed to judge face-to-face contact meetings by relatively ordinary criteria - much as they would view meetings with friends or relatives in their adoptive family: for most meetings were not a big emotional event. There were small numbers of children who expressed sensitivity about their contact. Seven children talked about how having contact could make them feel sad or miss their birth family. These children generally valued contact highly and sometimes wanted more frequent contact. A small group of four children did express mixed feelings about having contact with their birth family: these were children who had negative feelings about birth relatives seeing them as rejecting, embarrassing or scary. At the time of the interviews most of the children were content with their contact arrangements: they did not want to change anything about them. Those children who expressed a desire for change mostly wanted to receive letters and cards a little more frequently, or to see their birth relatives a little more often.

3. Adoptive parents' views of contact

Most adoptive parents involved in ongoing face-to-face contact said they were very happy with this type of contact, and they said they felt the meetings were positive or straightforward for the children. In most cases adoptive parents described increasing relationships of trust with birth relatives. Mostly adoptive parents saw the purpose of contact as to help their child in the long run make sense of their background and history; they also valued the opportunity to find out more for themselves about their child's birth family. Some grandparents were able to provide a useful indirect link to, or information about, the birth parents in situations where birth parents did not have any contact. Some adoptive parents felt that contact meetings were starting to have more meaning and interest to their growing child; other adoptive parents felt that contact meetings were still quite low-key from the child's point of view.

There were a number of reasons why face-to-face contact seemed to be experienced mainly positively (especially compared to the more mixed reactions where children are older at placement). Most children did not have an established relationship with birth relatives before placement – children were not emotionally bound up with birth relatives so contact was a fairly low key event, like visits with extended family members. The birth relatives involved in face-to-face contact arrangements generally showed high levels of support of the child's adoption. Finally contact meetings were almost always set up as 'whole family' events with adoptive parents present and in control. This meant that adoptive parents felt secure and could adjust arrangements to maximise the comfort for everyone, especially the child (it is interesting that in the only case where adoptive parents ended contact, they were not part of the child's contact meeting with birth family).

Adoptive parents who were unhappy with face-to-face contact tended to be unhappy because the contact had stopped. In a few cases adoptive parents felt the contact had been difficult, and they were relieved it had stopped. For example one family felt that the child's birth mother had too many problems and needs of her own; another adoptive family felt that the birth parents couldn't relate appropriately to the children during meetings.

We found that adoptive parents in our study had a very wide range of experiences and opinions about indirect contact. In some cases exchanging letters was working as a rewarding way for adoptive parents and their children and birth relatives to know more about each other. Some adoptive parents felt this type of contact was helping their child understand their background, and helping them to feel their birth family still cared about them. However in many cases this type of contact had not lived up to people's hopes. At our follow up, fewer than half of the children where indirect contact was the plan were getting any information from their birth relatives. We found four main types of difficulty with indirect contact. Firstly many birth relatives were not responding to contact, or they sent a response that adoptive parents felt was inappropriate. Secondly although adoptive parents valued the confidentiality that adoption agency controlled contact allowed, working through a third party sometimes caused delays, miscommunications and negativity. There were huge variations in the way agencies supported and controlled contact, and these could either support or undermine communication between the two families. Thirdly, people found it hard to know what to write; communicating by letter, with a complete or virtual stranger, about an emotional subject, was often very challenging. Finally, it was not always clear if, when and how parents should include their child in the contact. Not all adoptive parents involved their child in indirect contact, or even told them about the contact. Some people were waiting until their child was older. Some adoptive parents wondered how their child would feel when they did learn that contact had taken place.

4. Birth relatives' views about contact

It was clear that all birth relatives felt that any information about how their child or grandchild was getting on was "better than nothing". For birth relatives having face-to-face contact, most felt very privileged to be able to see the child and grateful to the adoptive parents, and they were pleased to be able to show their affection and that that they had not forgotten him or her. Some grandparents felt that they had been able to offer help to adoptive parents, for example answering their questions and offering advice about the child's issues. In some cases grandparents felt they were gaining an extra family, seeing all the children in the adoptive family as their grandchildren. Some aspects of face-to-face contact could be difficult for birth relatives however. Problems included feeling sad after meetings, high travel costs and being uncomfortable with rules and restrictions or feeling "watched" during supervised contact. Generally birth relatives felt their power in contact was limited; they were anxious not to upset adoptive parents and they wanted to "do the right thing".

As with adoptive parent interviews, we found that whilst indirect contact could work well, this was often not an easy way to communicate. The ability of many birth relatives to respond to letters was often undermined by practical problems with reading and writing, understanding when and how to respond (some people were not even sure if they were allowed to respond), changing addresses, and by emotional issues such as not knowing what to write, and feeling as if no-one would want to hear from them anyway. In terms of receiving letters, birth relatives were delighted to hear news about how the child was getting on, and hearing about their child making progress and enjoying life helped some people to feel that "something good had come out of something bad". Although any information no matter how limited was valued, some birth relatives did feel disappointed when they received only very brief and formal letters. Some people resented rules around letterbox, for example about how they were allowed to sign letters. Few birth relatives received support to maintain letterbox contact, but this seemed very much needed in many cases.

5. The relationship dynamics of contact

There were 30 cases in the study where we had interviewed adoptive parents and birth relatives about the same contact experiences. We used these 'matched' cases to look in some more detail at the dynamics between adoptive parents and birth relatives. This analysis identified the characteristics of adoptive parents and birth parents which contribute to the success of contact. We saw that contact works best when the adults involved can understand and respect everybody's needs and point of view, and where adults work together to do the best thing for the child. Relationship skills are important - flexibility, compromise, and being able to manage boundaries. The most successful contact arrangements were where adoptive parents and birth relatives both had these qualities of understanding and relationship skills. However some arrangements worked well where one party was very strong in these respects and could make up some of the difficulties that the other party might be experiencing. For example welcoming and confident adoptive parents could help birth relatives feel more accepting of the adoption, or birth relatives who respected boundaries and showed active support for the adoption could help anxious adoptive parents feel confident in their parenting role, and secure that their position would not be undermined. Contact worked best where birth relatives respected adoptive parents' power and didn't try to push the boundaries, but also where adoptive parents were willing to compromise and negotiate with birth relatives, making them feel part of the child's life in some way. It was also important that everybody had a clear vision about why they were doing contact, and where they believed that everyone had something to gain. Face-to-face contact seemed to help adults to work together because they had a chance to get to know and build trust with one another. There were more barriers to building trust in indirect contact because of complications of communicating through a third-party and by letter.

6. “One-off” pre-adoption meeting

A one-off meeting (usually around the time of placement) between adoptive parents and birth relatives was often organised in situations where indirect contact was the plan. These meetings were more common when the adoption was requested and birth mothers were more likely to be involved than fathers or grandparents. Almost everyone (birth relatives and adoptive parents) who had not met the other party expressed regret that this meeting had not taken place, even if they didn't want a meeting at the time. Most people who experienced a meeting spoke of it as a very emotional event, but on balance the adult-to-adult meeting was a positive experience and reaped many benefits. For many adoptive parents it was a source of positive and direct information about the birth family. For many birth relatives it was the only reliable evidence that the child will be loved and cared for in the adoptive family, and it seemed to help their subsequent acceptance of the adoption.

A few people did not find the meeting pleasant or helpful, this suggesting that it is important to think about how such meetings are set up and supported. For example, in three cases the meeting took place during a limited contact session between the birth relatives and the child/ren, or at the same time as the 'goodbye visit' with the children. People who had experienced this arrangement spoke of their difficulties in coping with both interactions at the same time. This clearly reduced the opportunity for the event to be experienced positively.

7. Children's understanding of adoption.

We used a series of 10 questions to measure how much children understood about adoption. This scores children on a scale of 0-5 – 5 being a very full understanding of adoption (usually it is only teenagers who score at this level). As we expected we found that the children in our study understood a little about adoption – but not everything. Most children were at the level of knowing adoption means you come from another mother's tummy and that you are now part of the adoptive family which is forever. However most children did not understand the legal basis of adoption, and were only beginning to understand about the complicated reasons why children are adopted. Not surprisingly older children scored higher than younger children, and children with no learning difficulties scored higher than those who had learning problems. Girls scored significantly higher than boys – others studies have found this too. We are not sure why this is the case though it seems from what parents told us, and from the children's interviews, that girls are more interested than boys in thinking and talking about families and babies. We didn't find that the contact children were having made any difference to their understanding of adoption. We think this is because this understanding of adoption depends mainly on the child's cognitive ability, something which develops with age.

8. Children's feelings about adoption.

Several years after their adoptions, almost all children felt fully and happily a part of their adoptive families; most said it felt like they had always been there. For some children a little older at placement (age three or four), the process of gradually becoming a member of the adoptive family was remembered, these children tending to *emphasise* their place in the adoptive family, as opposed to taking this for granted. There was no sense from the interviews that children were confused about differences between their birth and adoptive families, or that thinking about adoption or birth family members, or having contact with birth family, got in the way of children feeling close to their adoptive parents, or belonging to their adoptive family.

In terms of thinking about having a birth family and what this means, most of the youngest children were only just starting to think about this. About one quarter of children were not yet exploring the meaning of adoption. Another quarter of children found these issues unproblematic. About half of the children had complicated emotions that could be feelings of loss, sadness, fear or rejection in relation to their birth family (often in combination with some positive feelings, for example of love and affection). Some children did show some understanding of some of the more difficult and painful aspects of adoption (such as abuse and neglect, mental illness, addiction, adopters' infertility and loss), but even where these issues were mentioned children's grasp on what they meant was quite basic and there was much they did not yet know or understand. For example, few children understood the role of professional agencies in removing them from their birth families; some children felt that the adoption was their parents' choice, even when this was not the case. Some children understood that their parents could not look after them, but they often tended to see this in terms of being too young, or having no money or no house to live in; many children did not yet understand that their parents may have had other problems preventing them from taking care of them.

Although most children felt that being adopted was just ordinary or normal, over half of children reported experiencing uncomfortable questioning or teasing from other children about their adoption.

9. Adoptive parents – thinking and talking about adoption

We asked adoptive parents a number of questions about how they communicated about adoption within their family, and about their feelings about the value and importance of openness. Many different adoption researchers have argued that the 'atmosphere of openness' within adoptive families is just as important, or even more important, than what contact happens with the birth family. David Brodzinsky, a leading adoption psychologist, has called this type of openness within families 'communicative openness', which he defines as follows:

'the creation of an open, honest, non defensive, and emotionally attuned family dialogue' and a willingness of individuals 'to consider the meaning of adoption in their lives, to share that meaning with others, to explore adoption related issues in the context of family life, to acknowledge and support the child's dual connection to two families, and perhaps to facilitate contact between these two family systems in one form or another.' (Brodzinsky, 2005)

We developed a system to code 'communicative openness' for adoptive parents in our sample. We looked at what adoptive parents said about five different areas:

- communication with the child about adoption
- comfort with the idea of the child also being part of the birth family
- thinking about adoption from the child's point of view
- communication with the birth family
- thinking about adoption from the birth family's point of view

We scored adoptive parents on a scale of 1 to 5 for each of these five areas. We found that different people had quite different approaches in these five areas, but overall most people in our study scored quite highly. We found that adoptive parents involved in face-to-face contact arrangements had significantly higher scores than adoptive parents having indirect contact. We think this is for two main reasons. Firstly, adoptive parents who were more positive about openness from the beginning were more likely to agree to face-to-face contact arrangements. Some adoptive parents suggested this type of contact themselves. Adoptive parents who felt less comfortable with openness were willing to try indirect contact arrangements, but they didn't want to have face-to-face contact. Secondly, although not all adoptive parents initially felt totally comfortable with the idea of face-to-face contact,

over time they felt it had a number of advantages and that it helped them feel more open and comfortable. This could work in a number of ways including:

- Meetings with birth family provided opportunities for adoptive parents and children to talk and think about the meaning of adoption.
- Getting to know birth relatives helped adoptive parents to see adoption from the birth family's point of view
- Adoptive parents felt more comfortable with the idea of the birth family once they knew birth relatives as 'real' people.
- Meeting birth relatives helped adoptive parents manage their fears about the child's 'other' family.

10. How well were children doing?

Adoptive parents filled in a form called the 'Child behaviour checklist'. From this we could see how the children were doing in terms of their emotional and behavioural development. Most children were doing very well; this is good news given the difficult starts some children had experienced. About a quarter (28%) of children had serious difficulties with their emotional and behavioural development. These problems varied, but most commonly they included problems with disobedient or angry behaviour and/or difficulties getting along with other children. We found that boys had higher levels of problems than girls. We found that the children most likely to have problems were those who had been placed at older ages, who had more changes of placement before adoption, and who had suffered more abuse or neglect before adoption. Even where children were having problems, in most of these families parents and children had good relationships and were happy with the adoption.

11. Were there any differences in children's emotional and behavioural development between children having face-to-face contact and children having no contact or indirect contact?

It was an important aim of our study to find out if having contact with birth relatives might have any effect on adopted children's development. Fears that birth family contact might harm or upset children are still widespread. Other people argue that birth family contact might improve children's development. We compared children having no contact or indirect contact with children having face-to-face contact. We didn't find any difference between the groups in terms of children's emotional and behavioural development. We also looked at the 'communicative openness' scores of adoptive parents to see if children of more open parents were doing any better or worse than children with less open parents. Again we didn't find any difference. This could mean that the contact and openness within adoptive families are not relevant to children's emotional and behavioural development. However there are many factors that can affect children's development, and in a study of our size is very difficult to isolate contact as a single factor. It is also possible that putting children in two groups did not reflect the many variations in contact, or that it is not the type of contact that matters but the quality of contact. It might also be that contact and openness do affect children, but not in the way that we measured it, or at the time we measured it. This study was carried out when children were in middle childhood; this may be too early to judge the effect on children as most were not yet actively thinking about their adoptive identity. Most adoptive parents we talked to felt that contact was 'neither here nor there' at this stage of their child's life; they were taking part in contact arrangements because they felt it might help their child in the future. As one mother put it, 'it's a long term plan'. Most parents expressed the view that contact might have more meaning to their children when they became teenagers. These findings show that it is important to keep an open mind about

the effect of contact on children, and more research is needed to follow up children when they are older.

12. Birth relatives – acceptance of the child's adoption

We looked at how birth relatives felt about their child (or grandchild's) adoption several years after the adoption. We looked at the feelings people had about the adoption and if they accepted that the child now had a new mum and dad and a new family. Although most people expressed unhappy feelings about the loss of the child, and most had never wanted the adoption to happen, we found that almost all the birth relatives understood that the adoption could not be changed, and they stressed that they wouldn't want to do anything to upset the child in their adoptive family. However we found differences between birth relatives in their *feelings* about the adoption, and three main patterns were identified:

- Positive acceptance. These were people who expressed positive views of the adoptive parents, who felt good about their own ongoing contribution to the adopted child's life, who had, on balance, good feelings about how things had worked out. These people took part well in post adoption contact. About half of the birth relatives we interviewed showed these views.
- Passive/resigned acceptance. People in this group accepted the adoption as permanent and were often positive about the adoptive parents. But their feelings about themselves were very poor. They often said they felt helpless and depressed and still grieved for the child all the time. Many people in this group found it hard to keep up post adoption contact. About one third of birth relatives we interviewed fitted this pattern.
- Angry and resistant. These people accepted the adoption in their head, but resisted it in their hearts. They felt very angry about the adoption and felt it had been unfair. Sometimes this anger stopped people taking part constructively in contact arrangements. About one in five of birth relatives in the study were angry and resistant.

We found that grandparents were more likely to show positive acceptance of the adoption compared to birth parents. We also found that people having face-to-face contact were much more likely to show positive acceptance of the adoption compared to people having indirect contact. It seemed hard for birth relatives to positively accept the adoption when they were having only very minimal indirect contact, especially when they had never met the adoptive parents.

In some cases the contact that people were having seemed to follow on from whether they did or did not accept the adoption e.g. some people were allowed face-to-face contact because they were so supportive of the adoption; some people only had minimal contact because they were so angry about the adoption. However in many cases it seemed that it was actually the experience of having face-to-face contact that had helped birth relatives to feel better about the adoption. Birth relatives talked of the importance of seeing for themselves how happy their child was, how well he or she was getting on, and what nice people the adoptive parents were.

Looking now at the mental health of birth relatives, we found that over half of people who completed the "Brief Symptom Inventory" were experiencing distressing psychological symptoms at a clinically significant level. This was true for over 70% of birth parents, and one in five of grandparents. We could not tell from this study whether these psychological problems were long-standing, or whether people were expressed experiencing distress as a result of the adoption.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The study included the perspectives of adoptive parents, adopted children and birth relatives. The research built on an earlier study where background information was collected from social workers in adoption agencies, and some adoptive parents had been interviewed at a previous stage. There is a plan for the study to continue, to follow up families overtime. The children included in the study were domestically adopted children, most of whom had been in care before adoption - as such they reflect the general population of children being adopted in the UK at the current time. The study included a range of contact arrangements rather than just one type of contact and collected both detailed interview data and some standardised developmental measures. Outputs from the study have been independently peer reviewed.

In terms of limitations, the research 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 response rate from people involved in face-to-face contact arrangements was very good. However 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 is probably biased towards people who have attempted to keep up 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 people's longer term experiences of contact are, especially when the children become teenagers and young adults.

KEY MESSAGES FOR PRACTICE

There is not one type of contact that is best for every child – each child's situation should be considered individually and both the benefits and risks of contact must be considered. Ideas about face-to-face contact being "difficult" and indirect contact being "easy" are too simplistic. Contact plans should be based on the needs, strengths, difficulties, and wishes of everybody involved, rather than determined by "standard practice". Face-to-face contact will not be suitable for every adopted child, but this type of contact should not be automatically dismissed for children on the grounds that they are "too young" or because they do not remember birth relatives.

Support and review of contact plans should be available for all parties to enable contact (where it is positive) to be kept up over time, and to address problems that may arise. Although the focus of contact must be the needs of the child, contact has an emotional impact on adults as well; where contact is very difficult for adults it is likely to be difficult for children. It is important to understand the needs and feelings of adoptive parents and birth relatives as well as children, and to support all three parties.

In many cases grandparents may have fewer problems (including mental health issues) compared to birth parents, and grandparents could provide a useful resource for adopted children. Think about including grandparents in contact – face-to-face or letterbox, in cases where grandparents have played (or have the potential to play) a positive part in children's lives. Most grandparents kept up contact over time, and most contact arrangements involving grandparents appeared to work very well from everyone's point of view.

Where indirect contact is planned, try to set up a carefully supported meeting between birth relatives and adoptive parents. Keep this meeting apart from the child's "goodbye" visit, and from the introductions between the child and adoptive parents, as these other events are also highly emotional. This type of meeting could be useful even sometime after the placement.

The communicative openness of adoptive parents (that is, the openness with which they thought and talked about adoption) is a useful way to think about which adoptive parents will be good at handling complex contact situations. Whether birth relatives can accept the adoption and support the adoptive parents is another factor that helps understand when contact is likely to work out well. However the "openness" of adoptive parents and the "acceptance" of birth relatives are not necessarily fixed factors; with appropriate support, and discussion and information, and following positive experiences of contact, people's thoughts, feelings and opinions can change. Assessing these factors just at the pre-placement stage may not always accurately indicate the changes that may occur after placement.

Children have a range of questions and feelings about adoption and birth family contact. Adoptive parents should be reassured that these feelings and questions do not mean that children are unhappy or insecure in their adoptive family. Some adoptive parents may need support in knowing what to tell their child about adoption (especially when the child's background is particularly sad or difficult), and it is important that relevant information is available to adoptive parents and children so the child's questions can be answered.

Children may need support in coping with teasing or questions related to their adoption and schools should consider how negative experiences can be prevented.

Many birth relatives of adopted children are likely to be experiencing a high level of distressing psychological symptoms such as feelings of depression or anxiety. It is important that the impact of adoption is recognised by mental health workers, and that mental health issues are recognised by adoption support providers.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE STUDY

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