

Planning and Supporting Birth Family Contact When Children are Adopted from Care

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Historically, adopted children would have no contact with their birth family, indeed this was seen as a virtue. This creates problems of identity for the child. For both the child and the birth family there are issues of ambiguous loss: the significant other is absent yet perhaps present somewhere in the world. For adoptive parents, answering children's questions, especially the question 'why was I adopted', is hard when you have little knowledge, if any, of birth parents.

When children are adopted from the care system staying in touch with members of their birth families must be considered. These are weighty and complex considerations: children's backgrounds and family circumstances are by definition difficult; the adoption system itself is adversarial; and many different people's needs and desires must be taken into account. National policies, local practices, and individual and collective belief systems shape the plans that are made for children to stay in touch or not or with their birth relatives.

This research paper draws on the English experience. England is similar to the US and a small number of other countries using adoption to secure a permanent family home for those children in the care system who cannot be returned to their families. In England predominantly children under five are adopted from care. There is a legal requirement to consider (but not necessarily pursue) contact after the adoption order. Where contact does happen it is commonly voluntary.

Most children are expected to stay in touch with their birth parents, typically through letters that are exchanged via the adoption agency. About one third of children will meet with siblings, usually those who are in foster care or other adoptive families. Meetings with parents or grandparents occur for less than one in five children. This suggests professional uncertainty about the benefits for children of face to face contact especially with birth parents.

I draw on three research studies: an 18 year longitudinal study of all types of contact (Neil et al, 2015); a study of face-to-face contact and how it can be supported (Neil et al, 2011); and a survey of adoptive parents (Neil et al, 2018). *The overall conclusion is that staying in touch with birth relatives can be positive for adopted children when arrangements carry minimal conflict and where the child's place in their adoptive and birth family are both respected.* There are three key considerations: (1) making individualised decisions not blanket policies (2) considering the quality of contact (3) offering support according to need.

Treating each child's situation as individual

In England, notwithstanding variations in children circumstances, letter contact with parents is almost always the plan (Neil et al, 2018; Neil, 2018). To write

a fitting letter to a virtual stranger about a child you share is arduous and sensitive. Many letter contact plans do not endure, satisfaction is often poor.

Face-to-face contact happens for a minority of children but in many cases is more lasting and satisfying (Neil et al, 2015). We should consider whether more children could have face-to-face contact than is currently the case.

Contact plans should not be 'cut and pasted' but personal to each child. This requires individual assessment, the starting point of which is thinking about who and what children need know, now and in the future. Key reasons to have contact can be summarized as 'roots' and 'relationships'.

Children adopted after difficult early life experiences may have long-term problems in their development and relationships. Birth family contact may neither resolve nor exacerbate these difficulties (Neil et al, 2015). How children do is determined more by their pre-adoption experiences than such subsequent contact they may have with birth relatives. Nevertheless contact of good quality is valued by all involved.

"He's grown up with the knowledge that he lives with us because he was loved but his parents were both ill"

(Adoptive mother, Neil et al, 2015)

"The information I learned and photos I saw made me feel like I was learning about myself, where my nose came from, why I enjoy art so much"

(Adopted young person, age 19, Neil et al, 2015)

"I don't have to wonder because I know he's out there and I know he's alright"

(Birth mother, Neil et al, 2015)

Although contact may not affect adoptee's overall development, in the longitudinal study we found that young people who had higher, sustained levels of contact had a better understanding of where they came from, why they were adopted,

and they felt more at ease with their adoption story (Neil et al, 2015).

Contact is about mutual learning, a chance for everyone to learn about everyone else. Myths can be dispelled, empathy built, and feelings of loss managed if birth and adoptive families provide answers for each other to significant questions of identity. But you cannot take pain out of contact.

"The first contact we had, it was like trying to swallow a big bullet to say 'your mummy and your daddy'. But now it is how I think of them, even inside my head." (Birth mother, Neil et al, 2011)

For the child contact demonstrates that their adoptive parents are open to talking about adoption. Contact letters and meetings provide a natural opportunity for adoptive parents to talk to their child. There is a sense of working on complex issues together, and divided loyalties for the child are softened. Face-to-face contact in particular, appears to help adoptive parents and children communicate thoughts, facts and feelings about adoption (Neil, 2007).

For some, contact is about staying in touch with or getting to know important people. Children who know and love their birth relatives don't want to lose them. Children can treasure meetings with them. These relationships do not necessarily intrude on relationships between children and their adoptive parents. Indeed, adoptive parents supporting contact with valued birth family members can draw the members of the adoptive family closer.

"I think that every time he sees [his brothers] he's just a little bit more settled. I think you can see in him that he is happier and more content knowing his brothers are okay."

(Adoptive mother, Neil et al, 2011)

Assessing when contact is likely to be a positive experience.

Contact has advantages and considerable difficulties: people may feel letters do not convey the real individual; (*"a letter and a photo is never*

going to give you a true idea of who someone really is” - adopted young person, Neil et al, 2015); contact is emotional for everyone; all parties must consider roles and boundaries; interactions may be uncomfortable especially if meetings are infrequent. The major challenges are for children with a troubled family history: children may want to see or hear from their parents but may be angry, afraid or disappointed. Contact can distress where there is a past of abuse or neglect.

“There was very big fallout. Their behaviour ... the children were very clingy, more volatile ... they were very cross and angry.”

(Adoptive parent, Neil et al, 2011)

Clearly the risks and benefits of contact must be individually assessed. This cannot be done at a single, fixed point in time. Circumstances and children’s wishes and feelings change as they mature. Arrangements should be reviewed and adjustments made when need arises.

The child’s relationship (or absence of) with family members must be thought about. For one child the key person to stay in touch with may be their mother, but for another their brothers and sisters. Even where children did not know their birth relatives before adoption, contact can work. The child may view their birth parent more like an ‘aunt’ than parent (the emotional intensity of contact may actually be lower in such cases). Contact with siblings and grandparents is generally positive. The meeting of children with birth parents is seldom emotionally straightforward, especially for those adopted at older ages. Infrequency and impersonal settings do not help. Some birth parents may communicate poorly with their child and need further support. Some children cope with the emotional currents of contact better than others (likewise for birth relatives and adoptive parents). Children who find life generally stressful are likely to be those who find contact the trickiest.

How the adults think about and manage contact is vital to the child’s experience. Contact is a balancing act likely to work best where adoptive parents and birth relatives respect each other’s roles in the

child’s life. Each should accept the child as part of their own family while supporting them as a member of their other family. Where the child is viewed as an exclusive property of one family or the other contact will be tense and potentially deleterious to the child.

Assessing how everyone will manage contact is hard while legal processes are ongoing; children, birth relatives and prospective adoptive parents are at their most unsettled, and calm, clear thought is disturbed. Ideally, once the dust has settled, discussions about contact should be revisited.

Key questions for families and professionals to consider

- **For the child: who is important to them; what would it help them to know as they grow up?**
- **What contact does everyone want?**
- **What are goals of contact?**
- **To what extent can adoptive parents and birth family members work together to achieve these goals?**
- **What risks might there be?**
- **What type and level of contact can people commit to and sustain and what support might they need to do so?**
- **What is the process for reviewing plans if they need to change?**

Practice resources: <https://contact.rip.org.uk/>

Supporting contact for adopted children

The extent to which families can manage contact arrangements by themselves will vary. Where adoptive parents are confident and open about contact, and where birth relatives pose few risks and are ready to work alongside adoptive parents, then families may be more comfortable making their own plans. They can adjust arrangements to suit their individual situations, communications can be smoother, and meetings can feel more like a regular family get-together than a formal “contact” situation. But when children are adopted

from care, it is not realistic to expect every adoptive parent to be able to manage contact situations without professional help. For those supporting contact, a clear focus not only on the child's needs but also on those of the birth relatives and adoptive parents is vital.

Contact support tasks are often practical. Examples include mediation through passing on letters or help with wording letters, providing transport or financial assistance to a birth parent, helping track down missing relatives. But the intensely emotional, interpersonal nature of contact must never be underestimated.

"I get so tense, enormously tense, and frightened to death that something will go wrong on the contact... I want everything to be so perfect for the girls ... I want it to be so perfect because it is only once every six months that we get to see one another."

(Birth mother, Neil et al, 2011)

People need safe conditions to express and process their feelings, and to understand how best to relate to each other. Helping adoptive parents to manage complex risk is important. Individual approaches must be taken so that intervention is proportional to risk: it is unrealistic to expect adoptive parents to bear sole responsibility for managing visits between a child and their birth parent where birth parents have problematic lives and/or behaviours. It is also possible to be too anxious about risk. A clear example is where a loving grandparent is allowed only cursory, supervised meetings with their grandchild.

Sometimes it is deemed necessary for a professional to attend contact meetings. Our research suggests contact that is just "supervised" and not positively helped is not a welcome experience for families. Visits need to be comfortable and, ideally, enjoyable and fun. The role of the worker is not merely to prevent anything bad happening, but to help things to go as well as possible for everyone concerned.

Conclusions

When birth families and adoptive families work together in the best interests of the child, the

potential for adoption to be a positive experience is much enhanced. Contact arrangements provide an important opportunity for this to take place. Achieving the best outcomes for children requires challenging long held beliefs and fears and moving away from established practices. Every family is different, and contact plans need to reflect the needs, wishes, feelings and capacities of children, adoptive parents and birth family members. This requires flexible thinking about families, and the acceptance that although an adopted child loses legal connection to their birth family, they do not lose biological, relational and psychological connection.

"It is important that the child knows where they've come from and has at least someone of their blood to know, to have some contact with them, so if they have any questions of who they are they've got someone to ask."

(Adopted young person, Neil et al, 2015)

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Research

- Research is needed to understand how individuals adopted from care keep in contact, open up contact or close down contact with their birth families in adulthood.
- Action research projects focused on helping organizations to make research informed practice changes in the field of contact after adoption should be attempted.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Practice

- Help prospective adoptive parents think about how they can meet adopted children's identity needs and maintain birth family connections, during recruitment, preparation and when offering support.
- Create opportunities to bring adoptive parents and birth families together, so they can jointly plan how contact can meet children's identity and relationship needs.
- Provide services for adoptees entering adulthood, as this is a key stage when people may wish to review their contact with birth relatives.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Policy. Author

- Adopted adults should have access to their birth and adoption records.
- Legal frameworks for adoption should allow for and encourage birth family contact unless this conflicts with the best interests of the child.



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Elsbeth Neil is a registered social worker and Professor of Social Work and Director of Research at the School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England. She has several years practice experience in social care and social work settings with a range of service user groups. She has been undertaking research in the field of adoption since 1996 and has conducted a longitudinal study focusing on postadoption contact, following through to late adolescence a group of adopted children and their birth relatives and adopted parents. She has also completed two studies funded by the UK government: the 'Helping Birth Families' study which examined support services for birth relatives of children adopted from care, and the 'Supporting Contact' study which looked at how adoption agencies support face-to-face contact arrangements between adoptive children and their birth relatives. Building on her research into contact, and in collaboration with Research in Practice, in 2017 Beth launched a new website of practice resources for professionals planning and supporting post adoption contact: <http://contact.rip.org.uk/>

Beth's current research includes a study of the care pathways of children in care using administrative data, a practice development project focusing on children's transitions from foster care to adoption, and a large survey of adoptive parents.