

The background image shows an older woman with short grey hair, wearing a dark blue dress and a black shoulder bag, walking away from the camera. She is holding the hand of a young girl with long blonde hair, who is also wearing a dark blue dress over a light blue shirt. They are walking on a paved path that runs alongside a green lawn and a black metal fence. Other people are visible in the background, including a person in a red shirt and white hat. The image is overlaid with several large, semi-transparent orange circles in the upper right and a pink and blue shape with a dotted border in the lower left.

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Contact after adoption: your views

A summary of key findings for birth relatives

The study: who took part?

This study started in 1996 and has been following up adoptive families and birth relatives since then. Some families have taken part three times, other families have taken part twice. This third stage of the study was carried out at the University of East Anglia by Elsbeth Neil, Mary Beek, and Emma Ward. It was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Key Questions

- How were the adopted young people getting on?
- What was having contact like for adopted young people?
- Did contact last over the years?
- What did birth relatives like and find difficult about having contact?

Key findings: how were adopted young people getting on?

- Almost all young people were very happy in their adoptive families.
- About half of adopted young people were doing great; the other half had some problems: being a teenager was a tough time.
- The contact that young people had with their birth families was usually not the reason why young people were doing well or not doing well - other reasons were more important.



What was having contact like for young people?

Almost all adopted young people thought there were benefits to having contact with their birth relatives. They liked finding out what their birth family were like, and the reasons why they were adopted. Some young people felt that contact helped them learn about themselves:

“Some of 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.”

Other young people enjoyed having a relationship with people in their birth family:

“I see my birth grandmother more as a friend now, like I can talk to her about anything.”

- Young people who had more contact with their birth family tended to talk more with their adoptive families about adoption. This had helped young people to understand their identity and answer the question “why was I adopted?”.
- Although most young people were glad they had had some contact with birth family members, keeping up this contact was not always easy for them, especially if they were having a tough time as a teenager.
- Getting letters or meeting with birth relatives could be quite emotional or awkward, especially when birth relatives were unwell or had other problems of their own.
- Some young people felt hurt, sad or rejected when their birth relatives did not stay in touch with them.
- Some young people felt that contact did not answer all their questions, or that it didn't give them a realistic picture of their birth family.

Did contact last over the years?

- Contact arrangements did not always last – 40% of birth relatives had lost contact with the adopted child.
- Sometimes adoptive parents or the adopted young person decided to stop the contact - this was often difficult for birth relatives because they did not know why, and they were unsure about what would happen next.
- Contact by letter stopped more often than contact through meetings.
- Some adopted young people and their birth relatives had used social media sites like ‘Facebook’ to get in touch. But the thought or experience of being contacted ‘out of the blue’ was very worrying for some young people and birth relatives.

“It was nice to see her grow up and have the life she's got now”

Who took part in the study

38
Birth relatives

40
Adopted young people

45
Adoptive families
(who had adopted 65 children)

What did birth relatives like about having contact?

Birth relatives valued knowing how the adopted child was getting on.

"It was nice to see her grow up and have the life she's got now."

"If I didn't have that link I would probably be thinking, 'Has he died? Has he emigrated?' I'd have been wondering, but I don't have to wonder."

Some birth relatives found that having contact helped them feel better that they could not keep the child.

"It was a very great wrench for me not to be able to take him on myself. So the way it worked out has been very good for me personally, because I see that he's had so much love from his adoptive mother."

What did birth relatives find difficult about having contact?

Some birth relatives felt confused about what their role was in the adopted child's life.

It was hard to hear about the problems that some young people were having as teenagers.

Many people worried about what will happen to the contact when the young person reached 18 - would it carry on? Would the young person, and find them? Some birth relatives worried about how to answer questions that the adopted young person might ask them.

"I must prepare myself because he might ask questions like: 'why did you have me adopted?' He might feel a bit hurtful because I've got the kids here and he'll think 'why was I the only one adopted?'... And I'll have to explain that to him."

Key messages for birth relatives

- Adopted children do think about their birth family, and it does matter to them that you try to keep up any agreed contact
- It helps adopted children and young people if they know that you respect their adoptive parents and understand that they are part of their adoptive family
- As adopted children get older their feelings about contact can change. They might be having a tough time as a teenager and want a break from contact. Try to be understanding if this happens to you, and ask the post-adoption team for support.
- Contacting your child 'out of the blue' using social media might be very upsetting for him or her. Consider talking to the post-adoption team to ask for a 'birth relative intermediary service' so that you, and your child, can be supported and prepared. You can also ask for support from this team if you are contacted 'out of the blue' by the adopted young person.

The hardest thing for birth relatives seemed to be when contact stopped but they didn't know why.

"It's been really hard having letter contact and then breaking it.... To have those updates and then just take it away was more difficult I think"

Birth relatives who had contact meetings with the adopted young person were generally happier with contact than those who had just letters.

"If they write you letters, write them back. ...let them know what's going on in your life and let them know that you still think of them."
(Adopted young person)

Some overall messages about contact from the study

There is not one type of contact that is right for every child-everybody's situation is different.

Although contact does not really change how well young people get on in general, it can be a positive experience and help young people understand why they were adopted.

Contact is generally a positive experience for birth relatives, but it can also be difficult - some birth relatives need support to keep up contact and they need support if contact has to stop.

Children and young people's views about contact can change as they grow up - it is important to listen to how young people feel and what they want.

This study was carried out at the University of East Anglia by Elsbeth Neil, Mary Beek, and Emma Ward. It was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.



To find out more about the study please check out our website:

www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption

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