



Contact after adoption: your views A summary of key findings for adopted young people

### 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? Did seeing or hearing from birth relatives make any difference to how young people were getting on?
- What contact with birth relatives had happened over the years?
- What was having contact like for adopted young people?

## 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 contact with birth relatives had happened over the years?

When the young people in this study were adopted, in nearly every case it was hoped that some contact would be kept up with their birth family either through letters or meetings. But what had happened over 18 years?

- Contact arrangements did not always last by the average age of 18 about one third of young people had no contact with their birth family, about one third were in touch with a sibling and/or had some letter contact with their birth family, about one third were having contact meetings with birth parents, grandparents or other adults in their birth family.
- There were lots of reasons why contact had stopped. Contact could be stopped by adoptive parents, by young people themselves, or by birth relatives. Some contact plans had stopped because birth relatives had died.
- Contact by letter stopped more often than contact through meetings.

# What was having contact like for young people?

About half of young people were very happy with how much contact they had had with their birth family; some of these young people had a lot of birth family contact, but others had only a little amount of contact.

For most however the arrangements had been stable and predictable over the years, so people knew what to expect.

"I wouldn't change anything about the contact because I think it's just been right"

The other half of young people were unhappy with some things about their contact arrangements. Again, some of these young people had had a lot of contact, and others not much at all; in many cases contact arrangements had changed over the years.

Sometimes contact had changed because the young person was unhappy about it.

"It was good to know I was being thought of but at the same time I feel like my grandparents think they know me and I don't feel like I know them. I felt a lot of pressure when meeting them."

"I was very emotional and so I just wanted to focus on one family rather than two"

For other young people, they were unhappy because the contact had stopped, or because there was somebody else in their birth family they would like to have contact with.

"If I could get my mum to write to me I would do that"

"I wanted to know why I couldn't see my birthmother, that's been the question"

Who took part in the study

38 Birth relatives 40 Adopted young people Adoptive families (who had adopted 65 children)

### What did young people like about contact?

Almost everyone thought that there was something good about having contact with birth family members. These are the main benefits young people talked about.

### Understanding the reasons why they were adopted

"It's nice to be able to see [birth mum] and have a complete picture of her ... when you see her on a bad day...that makes you understand [why I was adopted]."

#### Understanding 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."

#### Having a relationship with birth relatives

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

#### Knowing adoption is an open topic with adoptive parents

"We don't have to be scared of 'can we talk about our birth family in front of them, will they get upset?" Although most young people were glad they had had some contact with birth family members, keeping up this contact had challenges as well as benefits. These challenges were:

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.

"It's quite difficult [chatting with my birth mum]...its upsetting to see her how she is, but I like to see that she is okay and that she's safe"

Some young people felt hurt, sad or rejected when their birth relatives did not stay in touch with them, when they talked about their other children or pets, or when their birth relatives died.

"I don't know how [my birth mother] feels. That's one of the horrible questions that I ask probably on a weekly basis 'what happens if I get to 18 and she doesn't like me?"

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.

"I felt like I'd been led on through the letter contact because I thought that she was this amazing woman and then she turned out to not be that at all."

"I wouldn't change anything about the contact because I think it's just been right"

#### Contact and identity

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 make sense of why they needed to be adopted - the birth family contact had helped build their adoptive identity.

## 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.

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.

"[Social workers] really need to know how the young child feels about it...actually ask them what kind of contact they would like... they need to make the options more available for the young people"

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

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

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