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The Contact after adoption study:
**Stage 3 of a longitudinal study
of adoptive and birth families**

This research was the third stage of a study that has followed up a group of adopted children, and their adoptive parents and birth relatives focusing on the issue of post adoption contact. This third stage revisited the families on average 16 years after the children were adopted when under the age of age 4. The study was undertaken in 2012-13 by Elsbeth Neil and her colleagues from the University of East Anglia. It was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Aims of the study

In the past adoption was often clouded in secrecy and typically no contact between the birth and adoptive families took place. From the late 1980s people started to experiment with more "open" adoptions where children had some ongoing contact with their birth family. This study was set up to explore how well these more open adoptions were working from the perspective of everyone involved.

The study aimed to address seven key questions:

1. How were the adopted young people getting on in adolescence?

2. What types of openness have adopted young people, adoptive parents and birth relatives experienced since the last follow up in middle childhood?

3. What are the views of adopted young people, adoptive parents and birth relatives about the contact plans they have experienced?

4. How were the adopted young people making sense of their adoptive identity?

5. How open were adoptive parents in talking and thinking about adoption with their child?

6. How well were birth relatives doing in terms of their mental health and their acceptance of adoption?

7. What are the implications for practice that can be drawn from this longitudinal study?

How was the study done?

Adoptive and birth families who had taken part in the study at earlier stages were tracked down and invited to be in the study again. Interviews took place with adopted young people, adoptive parents and birth relatives. Adopted young people were also asked to fill in questionnaires looking at: emotional stability, self-liking and self-esteem, life satisfaction, attachment to adoptive parents, adoption communication openness with adoptive parents. Adoptive parents filled in questionnaires looking at the adopted young people's emotional and behavioural development. Birth relatives filled in questionnaires looking at their levels of mental distress.

What were the key findings?

- About half of young people were doing really well in terms of their overall development; the remainder had some problems and in some cases these were very worrying. No adoptions had completely broken down.

- Whether or not young people were doing well was affected by a range of factors both before and after placement, but contact with birth relatives was not an important factor in determining overall development.

- Post adoption contact had reduced over time; direct contact arrangements were more likely to last than indirect contact arrangements.

- As teenagers, young people started to make their own choices about contact: some young people stopped their contact whilst others chose to increase it.

- The use of social networking for birth families and adoptive families to find out about, communicate or reunite with each other had started to happen. This could be a helpful "add-on" to existing successful contact arrangements.

- The use of social media could be unhelpful when young people or their birth relatives, driven by unmet needs, made contact with each other without involving adoptive parents and without any preparation or support.

- Views of contact varied from person to person, but where contact had been predictable and sustained, satisfaction was usually high.

- Contact worked best where adoptive parents and birth relatives respected each other's roles and family boundaries, and where everyone focused on the needs of the adopted young person.

- Adopted young people experienced benefits from contact which included gaining information about their birth family, building an open atmosphere with their adoptive parents and enjoying relationships with birth family members.

"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."

"[Getting letters] makes you kind of feel that even though we're not with them, they still care…they didn't just completely dismiss us."

38
Birth relatives

40
Adopted young people

45
Adoptive families (who had adopted 65 children)
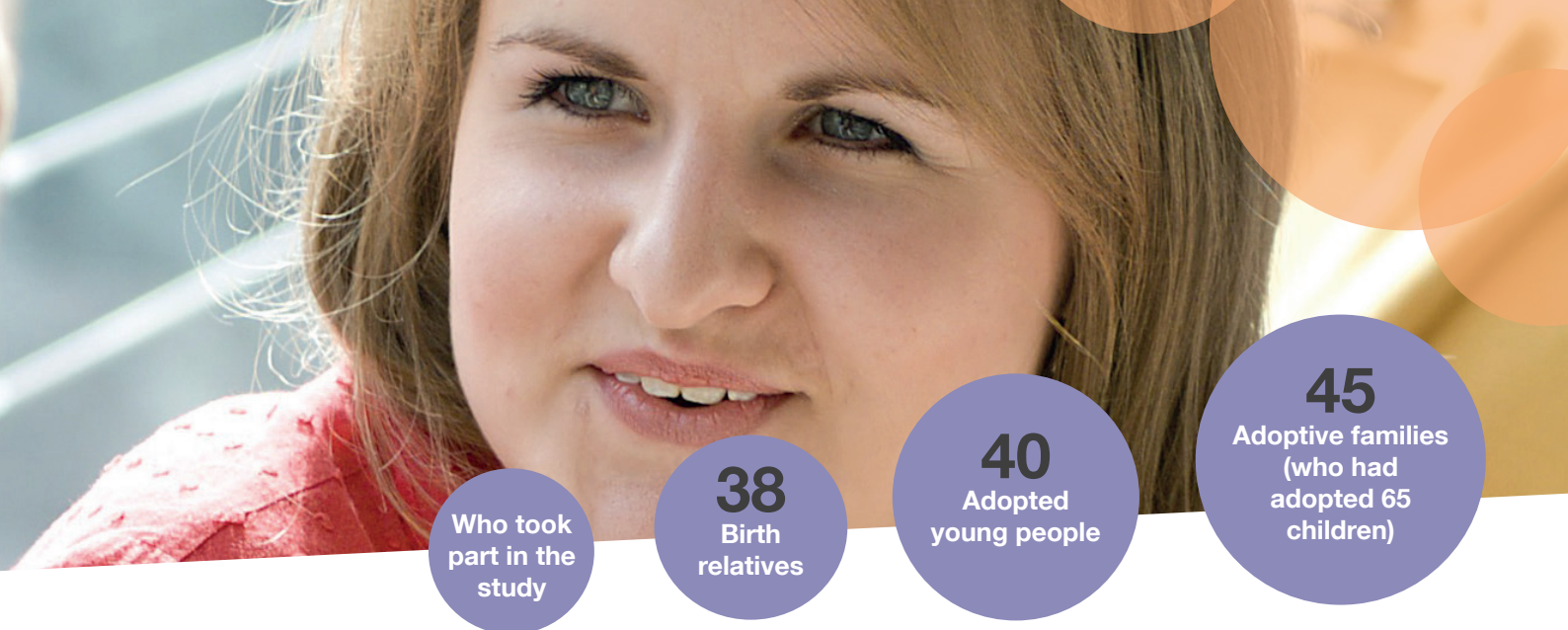
Who took part in the study

"It's knowing who [my birth mother] is and what she was like, rather than thinking 'she could be like this'."

- The challenges of contact for young people were mainly around managing the emotional strain of contact, being left with unanswered questions or unrealistic information, and being unhappy about gaps in contact.

"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?'"

- Adoptive parents valued contact in terms of finding out information about the birth family and being able to talk to their child about this, feeling less threatened by birth family members, and feeling more prepared for any future meetings.

"A mother popping up out of the blue would feel very threatening; so I don't have that threat because we already have that relationship with her." (adoptive mother)

- The challenges of contact for adoptive parents included managing practical issues, working out roles and boundaries, and dealing with the emotional strain including the reminder of the child having another family. Dealing with receiving no reply to letters was also difficult.

- Birth relatives benefited from contact in terms of getting information about the child's progress, easing feelings of guilt and loss, developing a relationship with the young person, and hoping that contact would reduce the child's sense of rejection.

"Without knowing the boy himself I've got an overall picture and that is so lovely. It's just peace of mind more than anything else, knowing he's alright, he's in safe hands and I couldn't have done anything better for him."

- Birth relatives were also challenged by the emotions of contact, knowing what to write in letters, managing roles and boundaries, and managing the loss if contact stopped.

"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."

- Young people varied in terms of how they were making sense of their adoptive identity, but almost all young people showed some interest in their birth family or adoption.

- Young people who had developed a cohesive sense of identity tended to have higher levels of birth family contact and communication with their adoptive parents - but birth family contact was not essential in making sense of adoption in every case.

- Adoptive identity development also seemed affected by gender, emotional and behavioural well-being, and learning disabilities.

- Contact could help promote a cohesive identity because it gave the adoptive parents and child information about the birth family, and aided their communication. This helped young people to process their thoughts and feelings about the adoption.

- Adoptive parents were mostly very open in terms of adoption communication and young people valued their parents being open.

- Higher levels of birth family contact were linked to high levels of communication about adoption, as each promoted the other.

- Many birth relatives had high levels of mental distress, and ongoing issues in coming to terms with the child's adoption.

- Grandparents and extended family members were more likely to show positive acceptance of the adoption compared to birth parents.

- Positive experiences of contact could help birth relatives feel more positive about the child's adoption.

"[My parents have] always been really open about it, we don't have to be scared of 'can we talk about our birth family in front of them, will they get upset?'"

Suggestions for practice

- Make realistic plans for adoption support which recognise that although adoption can provide a family for life, many children will have ongoing support needs, particularly in adolescence.

- At the stage of planning post adoption contact, try to move away from standard practices or assumptions within your agency. Focus instead on the individual needs, risks, and resources present in any one case.

- At the planning stage, listen to children, prospective adoptive parents and birth relatives to gain a realistic understanding of people's hopes and fears about contact. Use this information to plan contact that is likely to be predictable, positive and sustained with everyone sharing an understanding of what you are hoping to achieve.

- Consider what fathers, grandparents or other extended family members may have to offer the child in contact; don't focus just on birth mothers.

- Try to build the capacity of adoptive parents to be "open" in their communication and their attitudes about adoption. Raising people's understanding of adopted children's loss and identity needs, building empathy for birth relatives, and discussing how to introduce difficult topics may help.

- Consider birth relatives' potential to accept the adoption, recognising that this capacity can change and may be low at the time of contested proceedings.

- Promote an initial meeting between adoptive parents and birth parents/relatives.

- Encourage birth relatives to use specialist birth relative adoption support services.

- Where needed, provide ongoing support for contact particularly when birth relatives have additional needs for example with literacy or mental health issues.

- Prepare adoptive parents and birth relatives to understand the implications of social networking websites in adoption, and how to keep children safe.

- Offer ongoing review of contact arrangements, particularly as the young person approaches age 18.

- If contact stops, make sure all parties understand the reason for this and are offered support.

- Consider a range of ways (in addition to or as an alternative to contact when no contact is possible) to meet the child's identity needs such documenting records, life story books and life story work, letters for later life etc.

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.

This leaflet discusses just some of the findings from the Contact after Adoption study. To find out more please check our website:

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

Or email e.neil@uea.ac.uk

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Limitations and strengths of the research

Limitations:

- The sample is biased towards families with higher levels of contact and where adoptive parents are open in communicating about adoption. Therefore the study does not give a good picture of what happens in families where there is not much contact or talk about adoption.

- The findings might not always apply to children placed over age 4, many of whom will have stronger connections (both positive and negative) to their birth relatives.

Strengths:

- The views of adopted young people are foregrounded.

- The same families have been followed over time, allowing for a long-term perspective from the point of view of adopted young people and their birth relatives and adoptive parents.

- The sample is fairly typical of children adopted in the UK today where the majority are adopted from the care system under the age of five.