CONTACT AFTER ADOPTION:

A FOLLOW UP IN LATE ADOLESCENCE

Research Summary

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Stage 3 of the "Contact after Adoption" study: a research summary

This study was the third stage of a longitudinal project following up children placed for adoption under the age of four. The key aim of this third stage was to follow up for the third time a group of adopted young people (aged 14 to 21, mean age 18) as they transition into adulthood, exploring the impact of different contact arrangements on young people and their adoptive parents and birth relatives. The research explored the following seven questions:

1.   How were the adopted young people getting on in adolescence in terms of their emotional and behavioural development, perceived wellbeing, and relationships with adoptive parents?
2.   What types of openness have adopted young people, adoptive parents and birth relatives experienced since the last follow up at Time 2?
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?

Forty-five adoptive families (with 65 adopted young people) took part in the study. Of the 65 young people, the mean age at placement was 21 months. Forty-five young people (69%) were adopted from care using compulsory measures; 14 (22% were placed at their parents' request in complex circumstances (e.g. disabled children; preferentially rejected children; parents struggling to cope); 6 (9%) were relinquished as newborn babies. Forty adopted young people took part themselves, 32 of whom were interviewed. Twenty-eight birth families also took part in the study - 37 birth relatives in total took part in interviews. Compared to families who were in the study at earlier stages, but who dropped out, these adoptive families were more open in their communication about adoption, and birth relatives were more accepting of the adoption.

The study methods included in-depth interviews and the use of psychological measures. All the families who took part in the study had, at the time the child was placed for adoption, a plan for post-adoption contact between the adoptive family and the birth family. We looked specifically at two different types of contact, focussing on contact with adult birth relatives (mostly parents and grandparents). One type was face-to-face contact where the adopted child has meetings with their birth relatives. The other type was indirect contact – where letters and sometimes photos or cards are exchanged between adopted parents and birth relatives, via the adoption agency. The data were collected between 2012 and 2013. The research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. It was carried out by a team from the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia, directed by Elsbeth Neil. The research report has been independently peer reviewed.

Key findings.

How were the adopted young people getting on in adolescence in terms of their emotional and behavioural development, perceived wellbeing, and relationships with adoptive parents?

- Just under half of young people (45%) had significant emotional and behavioural difficulties, as assessed by the adoptive parents on a standardised psychological measure.
- Young people themselves perceived their psychological well-being more positively, with around three quarters presenting as satisfied with their lives, emotionally stable, and with good self esteem. Almost all young people perceived their relationship with their adoptive parents to be positive. Adopted young people's feelings of closeness with their adoptive parents had not been negatively affected by birth family contact.
- Researcher ratings identified half of the young people (n = 32, 50.8%) as "thriving" overall whilst the remainder were either "surviving" (n= 18, 28.6%) or "struggling" (n = 13, 20.6%).
- Less good developmental pathways appeared to relate to a number of factors which included pre-placement risks (such as exposure to abuse and neglect and changes in caregiving), pre-birth risks (such as exposure to drugs or alcohol, inherited vulnerabilities), and adverse life events after adoption such as bereavement, family disruption and bullying.
- The main factor influencing resilient pathways was the quality of adoptive family life. The vast majority of adoptive parents were highly committed to the young people despite any difficulties, seeking ways to help young people overcome their challenges. For minority of young people, the considerable efforts of their parents were not enough to prevent a poor outcome.
- Adoption support services had helped some young people. Most adoptive parents felt they had needed support at some stage after the adoption; appropriate support was not always available.

What types of openness have adopted young people, adoptive parents and birth relatives experienced since the last follow up at Time 2?

- By late adolescence, just over two thirds of young people were still in contact with at least one birth relative and about one third were no longer in contact with anyone in their birth family. Fifty-seven percent of young people remained in contact with an adult birth relative - in most cases this was their mother or maternal grandparents; only a few young people were in touch with their father or paternal relatives.
- For most young people, contact meetings or letters happened infrequently- usually once or twice a year. For a minority of young people who had experienced direct contact with birth relatives, the frequency of such contact, and the range of birth relatives involved, had grown substantially in late adolescence, usually at the young person's instigation.
- Across time, the majority of contact arrangements had altered in some way with over half of arrangements reducing in intensity (for example frequency) or stopping altogether. Changes in contact were often initiated by adoptive parents as a result of the benefits and challenges they and the adopted young person were experiencing. As the adopted young people moved through adolescence, some suggested or initiated changes in contact themselves.

- A lower proportion (36%) of direct contact arrangements stopped altogether compared to indirect contact arrangements (59.5%), and direct contact with extended family members was more likely to last than direct contact with birth parents.
- Few examples of positive and lasting two-way indirect contact were identified. Several adoptive families ended up writing to birth relatives but receiving no reply. This was viewed more positively were adoptive parents and young people had a clear expectation that this was the plan.
- Birth relatives' reports of their contact over time was similar to reports from adoptive families; at the time of this study 60% of birth relatives were still in touch with the adopted young person.
- Examples of using social media to make contact were given by adoptive young people, adoptive parents and birth relatives and three purposes of such contact were identified: to gain information about another party, to communicate with another party, to search for and seek a meeting with another party.
- The use of social media could be beneficial in the context of established trusting relationships, and where young people had the support of their adoptive parents.
- The use of social media (initiated by birth relatives or adopted young people) driven by gaps in existing contact arrangements was sometimes helpful but sometimes very unhelpful, especially where young people were unprepared and ill-equipped to cope.
- No particular patterns emerged when looking at young people's overall outcomes and the contact they had experienced over time. This suggests that birth family contact is not an important determinant of overall adoption outcome.

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

- Interviews with adoptive parents, birth relatives, and adopted young people suggested that most contact arrangements brought about a mixture of benefits and challenges. Key benefits related to finding out information about the other party, developing supportive relationships, having a climate of openness. Not all contact arrangements resulted in the child developing a relationship with birth relatives (though contact may have benefited parties in other ways), though this did occur in a minority of cases. The development of a significant relationship between the child and his or her birth relatives did not appear to threaten adoptive family relationships. Key challenges of contact related to managing practical arrangements, dealing with the emotions brought about by contact, and managing the dynamics and boundaries of relationships.
- Young people's overall satisfaction with their contact arrangements (which included the full range from none to extensive contact) was rated from the interviews. Over half of young people (53%, n= 17) were satisfied with their contact across time. Just under one third (31%, n= 10) had mixed satisfaction - they identified both advantages and disadvantages of their contact plan. A minority of young people (16%, n= 5) were not at all satisfied with their contact arrangements. Across each of these three groups young people had experienced a wide range of contact, including none. No one type of contact arrangement seemed particularly associated with satisfaction levels, although most young people who were unhappy with their arrangements wanted more contact, not less.

- Young people's satisfaction with contact appeared to be influenced by the stability of the contact pathway over time, the match between the young person's felt need and their contact, the quality of contact, the young person's capacity to manage the complexities of contact, and the support they received from their adoptive parents with this.
- Young people who were most satisfied with their contact tended to be those who were better adjusted overall.
- From birth relatives' points of view, any contact with the adopted young person was highly valued. About one third of birth relatives (n= 13, 35%) expressed high levels of satisfaction with their contact; the remaining two thirds of birth relatives (n= 24, 65%) reported mixed satisfaction with contact. Those in the mixed satisfaction group were mostly birth relatives who had experienced decreases (initiated by the adoptive family) in their level of contact over time.

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

- Young people varied in terms of their interest in adoption, and the relevance they felt adoption had in their lives. However few young people were completely disinterested in issues related to adoptive identity.
- Using qualitative methods, young people's identity formation was coded into four groups: cohesive, unexplored, developing, and fragmented.
- Identity formation appeared related to overall adjustment. Young people with a cohesive adoptive identity had the best overall adjustment, and young people with a fragmented adoption identity the least good adjustment. There was evidence that for some young people adoptive identity issues could affect their overall adjustment; in other cases it seemed that the young person's overall adjustment was affecting their ability to process adoptive identity issues.
- Young people in the cohesive identity group had experienced the highest levels of birth family contact, especially in the last 12 months. Most young people in this group were in contact with a birth relative who had not been involved in any abuse or neglect (for example a grandparent or a non-abusive birth parent). This suggests that birth family contact may have a role to play in helping young people make sense of their adoptive identity.

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

- The adoption communication openness (ACO) of adoptive parents was rated in two ways: researcher ratings from the adoptive parent interview, and a self-report measure completed by adopted young people. On both measures most adoptive parents were rated highly. On the self-report measure, young people tended to rate their adoptive mothers somewhat higher than their adoptive fathers, suggesting mothers may take more responsibility for communicating about adoption compared to fathers.
- The adoption communication openness scores of adoptive parents tended to be higher where levels of birth family contact were higher. However because adoptive parents can have a lot of control over contact, their ACO is likely to influence contact planning, and be influenced by having contact.
- Using young people's reports of their parents' adoption communication openness, young people in the cohesive identity group scored their parents highest on this measure, and young people in the fragmented adoption

identity group scored their parents lowest. This suggests that the young person's communication with their adoptive parents contributed to the development of a coherent adoptive identity.

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

- A substantial minority of birth relatives continued to experience high levels of psychological distress as measured on a standardised questionnaire.
- Birth relatives' interviews were analysed to identify the extent to which they were able to accept the adoption and move forward with their lives. Three patterns were identified: positive acceptance, resignation, anger and resistance. At time 3, just over two thirds of birth relatives were rated as showing positive acceptance (67%, n= 25), just over a quarter were resigned (27%, n= 10) and two were angry and resistant (5.4%, n= 2). For most birth relatives (84%) their level of acceptance was the same as in the second stage of the study 10 years earlier. In the small number of cases where acceptance had changed, this appeared to be linked to changes in contact. A higher proportion of extended birth family members positively accepted the adoption compared to the birth parents.
- Birth relatives experienced additional challenges in managing their feelings about the adoption during the young person's teenage years. These challenges related to managing their feelings about changes in the young person's development, and anticipating the possibility of changes in contact as the young person became an adult.

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

- **The need for adoption support.** This study suggests that adoption can provide stability and a loving family base for children who have experienced early adversity in life. However it clearly illustrates that even when this is achieved, many children are likely to have ongoing support needs that must be addressed. In this study, for some children's support needs had been apparent from an early stage of the placement. However in other families the child's need for support had emerged over time, and intensified particularly in adolescence.

    o These findings suggest that early intervention/preventative adoption support services should be considered even where needs may not be immediately apparent.
    o Key normative transitions that appeared to trigger difficulties in some children included the onset of puberty, and the transition to secondary school. The development of services aimed to support young people and their families at these developmental stages should be considered.
    o This study suggests that a minority of adopted children, even those placed early, may experience very significant developmental issues in adolescence. Some young people in the current study had needed very expensive out of home care, in some cases after failing to secure appropriate support at earlier stages. This suggest that an assessment of need for adoptive families may not be enough, but that this should be backed up by an entitlement to therapeutic support services to meet such assessed needs.

- **Implications for post-adoption contact practice.** This study, in line with much previous research, supports the idea that adopted young people have additional challenges in terms of making sense of their life story and their current identity. Whilst birth family contact in many cases is unlikely to have a significant impact on children's overall outcomes, it can, in the context of open communication within the adoptive family, be a valued experience and contribute to the adopted child's development of an adoptive identity. The role of birth family contact in stimulating adoptive family communication about adoption is also an important consideration. This suggests that the current policy position where the child's needs across their lifetime should be considered, and where contact should be considered as part of the child's placement plan, is appropriate. The study does not suggest that policy should move in the direction of further restricting post-adoption contact (except where this is warranted in individual cases), or introducing a duty to promote contact. It supports decision-making on a case-by-case basis.

  o The purpose and goals of contact should be clear and agreed by all relevant parties.

  o Contact plans should be sensitive to the individual wishes, feelings, and strengths and difficulties of all parties.

  o The child's needs, wishes and feelings (and those of adoptive parents and birth relatives) are likely to alter over time and variations in contact to reflect this may be needed.

  o The role of adoptive parents in helping young people manage contact issues, and make sense of their adoption story is crucial. The adoption communication openness of adoptive parents should be considered at the assessment stage, and should be built into adoptive parent training and support. The need for adoptive parents to be open in their communication about adoption should be considered in all cases, not just where post adoption contact is planned.

  o When considering who, from the child's birth family, should remain in contact with the child it is important to consider the extent to which birth relatives can sustain contact over time, and move to a position of positively accepting the adoption. The role of extended family members such as grandparents should be considered seriously, as in some cases extended family contact may have more benefits and fewer risks than birth parent contact in cases where children have been abused or neglected.

  o Were no contact is possible with certain key birth relatives (for example birth fathers) consideration should be given to how the child can access information about this birth relative.

  o All parties should have clear information about where they can seek support in relation to contact, and how they can go about negotiating variations to contact. A planned review of contact at intervals is likely to be beneficial in many cases to ensure that the contact is continuing to meet the child's needs.

  o Preparation and support should be available to adoptive and birth families in managing the issue of unplanned contact via social media.

o The possible positive role of social media in supplementing other forms of post-adoption contact could be considered.

o When planning what support (if any) is needed to help make contact a success for the child it is important to consider the following factors: risks to the child; relationships between the different parties and any support needed to facilitate these; support needed by adoptive parents and birth relatives to understand their role in contact; the management of boundaries in contact; the child's involvement in contact and how to make contact relevant and positive for the child; dealing with the emotions of contact; managing practical issues.

o More consideration needs to be given to contact arrangements once the child has reached the age of 18. Although legally adults, some adopted young people may not yet be ready to take on full responsibility for managing birth family contact themselves. Clarity about what will happen when the young person reaches 18 is important for all parties.

Strengths and limitations of the research.

There are a number of features of this study which add to its importance and originality within the field. To begin with, families were drawn from a complete cohort, avoiding key problems with volunteer samples; sources of bias relating to selective attrition have been measured and reported. The sample of families was drawn from a range of adoption agencies, reducing biases relating to agency cultures and practices. Longitudinal data collected over 18 years is available on these families. The sample is relevant to the majority of children adopted today in terms of the age of the children at placement, and the reasons they are placed for adoption. The study has collected data from social workers, adoptive parents, adopted young people, and birth relatives providing multiple perspectives on the topic. The views and experiences of a range of stakeholders have been valued and taken into account throughout the research. The study has been subject to detailed and critical peer review from adoption experts from within and outside of the UEA.

Limitations of the study are as follows. Families who have remained in the study may not represent all adoptive families. In particular adopted parents may have higher levels of adoption communication openness, and birth relatives may have more accepting attitudes towards the adoption. The study may not fully represent the experiences of families (and particularly young people) were no contact has occurred, or where contact has stopped at an early stage. This study has not included children placed for adoption at older ages (five or older); older children are likely to have higher levels of investment in their birth family, increasing the emotional complexity of the contact event for the child. The findings of this study may not be entirely applicable to voluntary infant placements, children adopted by relatives, or those in intercountry adoptions as the sample contained small numbers in the first category, and none in the second and third categories. The sample size of this study is too small to explore all the relationships between relevant variables in a quantitative analysis, although these relationships have been examined qualitatively.