

Maintaining children's birth family relationships in adoption? A theory of change

Elsbeth Neil, *Professor of Social Work, University of East Anglia, Norwich*



Elsbeth Neil is a Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. She has been researching adopted children's contact with their birth families for over 27 years. This has included carrying out the 18 year

longitudinal study *Contact after Adoption* study. She has contributed to the recent Public Law Working Group adoption report.

Problems with the current approach and calls for change

The approach to post adoption contact that has been dominant over recent decades is problematic. Contact planning tends to be formulaic, with letterbox contact being the usual plan. Adopted children have far less contact with birth family members than children in other permanency placements such as kinship or long-term foster care, even though these other children are often their brothers and sisters. Only a minority of adopted children have direct contact planned from the start. This results in the unnecessary loss of potentially beneficial relationships with birth parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents and/or other extended family members. Whilst letterbox contact is the norm, research and practice tell us that this is not an easy way to keep in touch and the majority of letterbox arrangements do not work out as intended. The practical and emotional difficulties of this way of communicating mean that often adoptive and/or birth parents do not keep

up the contact, or they (and often the child too) experience it as uninformative and not very satisfying.

There are also challenges around making direct contact meetings safe and meaningful. Meetings might feel unsafe for children especially where there is a history of abuse or neglect with the birth relative in question. In other cases the contact is not so much unsafe, as awkward or unrewarding. Often people meet only infrequently (typically just once or twice a year for an hour or so), sometimes in formal venues or public spaces. The connections do not feel relaxed or family like and adults do not often get a chance to communicate outside of the meeting with the child.

Due to the risk averse approach to contact, many adopted children young people struggle to gain the answers to questions about their life history and identity. There are now other ways for teenagers and birth relatives to try and find out about each other, and the use of social media for people to connect has been a growing phenomenon in adoption. Where teenagers and/or birth relatives make contact this way they can be ill prepared and unsupported, and the consequences can be upsetting for the adopted young person or even destabilising of the adoptive family.

These problems are now widely acknowledged and calls for a different approach to be taken are growing. In 2023 the President of the Family Courts gave a lecture on 'Adapting adoption to the modern world' in which he argued for 'provision for a continuing relationship with and knowledge of the birth family, with the child's needs being at the centre of all we

do. Every adopted child has a right to no less¹. The independent review of children's social care published in 2022 argued that 'Contact . . . should be assumed by default and modernised'². Adoption UK's view expressed in their 2022 *Adopter Barometer* report is that 'The idea that once a child is adopted it's as if their birth family no longer exists is no longer sustainable'³, and the House of Lord's report on the Children and Families Act 2014 to 2022 saw failure to modernise the approach to contact as potentially undermining the adoption system itself.

Developing a theory of change

Adoption agencies have recently regionalised into 32 Regional Adoption Agencies ('RAAs') and Adoption England is the new name of the National Adoption Strategy Team working with RAA leaders to support their work. One of the four strategic priorities for Adoption England is 'Maintaining relationships'; this priority is focused on modernising contact for adopted people so they can maintain relationships with the people important to them before they were adopted.⁴ A research team from the University of East Anglia were commissioned in 2022 by Adoption England to develop this theory of change to guide work around maintaining relationships. Theory of change work can be used to clarify long-term goals and identify intermediate goals and barriers to change. The theory of change incorporated existing and new research (particularly work carried out at the University of East Anglia such as the longitudinal 'Contact after Adoption study'⁵) with learning from focus groups and interviews with adopted teenagers, adopted adults, birth and adoptive parents, social workers and adoption agency leaders.

There was widespread agreement from all groups consulted around problems that arise

when relationships are not maintained in adoption. For example, one adopted adult wrote in a survey:

'knowing who you are and your roots are vital, and family ties can confirm this. I have never met my brothers as we were adopted separately, and we only found out about each other in our late 50s . . . Always thinking about how life might have been if we had known each other . . . It's a raw wound that never heals.'⁶

The loss that adopted people experience is ambiguous as their birth family may remain strongly psychologically present, but physically absent. The loss is disenfranchised as it is often overlooked, indeed adopted people can be told they are 'lucky' or 'special'. Adopted young people have frequent gaps and questions in their life stories, in particular an understanding of why they needed to be removed from their parents. Similarly, birth relatives have gaps and questions about what has happened to the child lost to adoption leading to unresolved grief and loss. Closed adoption also creates difficulties for adoptive parents. They are charged with helping their child to understand their identity and answering their child's questions, but without knowing the birth family these demands are hard to meet.

The potential benefits and challenges of maintaining relationships

There are a number of benefits to maintaining relationships when the quality of contact is good.⁷ For the adopted child keeping links with the birth family may help answer questions, build their understanding of their life story and hence build their identity. Children may avoid the unnecessary loss of valued relationships, particularly with brothers and sisters. The fact that

1 www.judiciary.uk/speech-by-sir-andrew-mcfarlane-adapting-adoption-to-the-modern-world.

2 <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122449/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report>.

3 www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=ebb3a36d-cc0d-45dd-aca9-7dd1d5dbbd23.

4 <https://adoptionengland.co.uk/>

5 www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families/contact-after-adoption.

6 www.uea.ac.uk/documents/96135/2234204/Maintaining+Relationships+with+Birth+Families+Research+Briefing.pdf/abd98696-87c1-0e44-ec3-d3451a90f045?t=1665759546138.

7 See 4 above.

adoptive parents support contact with the birth family can build trust between the adoptive parent and child, demonstrating that questions and feelings around adoption and the birth family are valid and welcomed. For adoptive parents, contact provides access to information and opportunities for conversations with the child. It can help adoptive parents deal with their own fears and anxieties about the birth family, and openness with the child can create a closeness in family relationships. For the birth family, staying in touch can help mitigate feelings of loss and allow birth family members to make a contribution to the child's life.

To understand contact we have to consider what the child, adoptive parents, and birth relatives all bring. No one type of contact will be best for everyone, but where a level of contact can be sustained that is satisfactory to the young person, this is linked to better outcomes for the child. Although letterbox contact is the norm, direct contact may actually be more likely to be kept up over time and is often experienced more positively than letters. An open attitude on behalf of the adoptive parents when it comes to talking and thinking about adoption and the child's birth family has been shown to be beneficial to the child. In the 2021 *Adoption Barometer* report, adopted young people aged 16 to 25 said their first priority was 'parents who are able to talk about all aspects of being adopted'.

Maintaining relationships after adoption is not necessarily easy. In a study of how direct contact after adoption was supported, we identified a number of challenges for families.⁸ People may need help with building relationships, understanding their different roles and family boundaries, managing complex feelings, negotiating and managing risk, and (particularly for birth relatives) practical help such as finance to travel to meetings. Some families needed a lot of help to maintain relationships, but in other cases the strengths of adoptive parents

and birth families meant that arrangements could be mostly or wholly self-managed.

A helpful synthesis of findings from 49 studies about how contact following placement in care, adoption, or special guardianship impacts children was carried out by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory in 2020.⁹ The recommendations of this report provide a roadmap for where we need to go with post adoption contact:

- we need to break away from standard formula and assess each child's situation individually taking account of strengths and risks;
- we need to consider a wider range of options for contact with a wide range of people;
- where support is needed it must be available;
- we have to build in opportunities to review contact, particularly at key developmental stages where children's understanding about and interest in adoption can change such as in middle childhood, adolescence, and during the transition to adulthood.

Barriers to achieving change

(1) Change needs to happen across a network of professionals. There are many professionals involved in the processes around post adoption contact including the child's social worker, adoption workers, IROs, Cafcass, lawyers and judges. Changing one part of this complex system is not enough, the change has to be systemwide. There is evidence that professional attitudes are risk averse regarding contact, and that the risks for the child of losing contact with the birth family are overlooked or underestimated, particularly when children are placed very young. Thus there is a need for education, training and easily accessible research findings for professionals across this complex system.

⁸ www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/briefs/DFE-RBX-10-04.pdf.

⁹ www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/contact-well-being.

(2) Adoptive parents need to be supported in being more open to maintaining relationships. Addressing the anxieties and support needs of adoptive parents around birth family contact is key. Training for adoptive parents needs to focus on the child's lifelong needs, build empathy for the child as an adopted person and for the birth family, and give adoptive parents the confidence and skills to manage communication and relationships with the birth family.

(3) Birth families need support to sustain contact. Many have lifelong challenges, and these can be exacerbated by the loss of the child to adoption. Birth relatives need emotional and practical support, particularly in the early stages of contact.

(4) A new focus on relationship building is needed. Practice in adoption has often traditionally focused on creating distance between the birth and adoptive family. There needs to be a refocusing on relationship building approaches. Even if birth parents and adoptive parents are only going to write to each other, it helps to have a sense of who you are writing to, and supporting birth and adoptive parents to meet is helpful in building mutual empathy, respect and collaboration.

(5) Attention in policy and practice, and allocation of resources are needed. The question of maintaining relationships with the birth family has been barely mentioned in recent government policy initiatives around adoption where the focus has been on reducing delay in placing children and increasing support services; this has shaped the focus of adoption agencies. To undertake key change activities is likely to require reallocation of resources or additional resources for already hard-pressed adoption agencies.

(6) Master narratives around adoption need challenging. Certain ways of thinking about adoption are unhelpful to a new approach which encompasses maintaining relationships. The impact of adoption is lifelong. Where adoption is thought of as 'a happy ending' or a 'fresh start', the child's

life, identity and family before adoption can be seen as irrelevant or of no value.

Adopted adults that we talked to were keen to emphasise that although adoption may bring benefits, it does involve significant losses and challenges. There are prevalent narratives around birth families that focus on risk, and there is a tendency in practice to consider that all birth families might pose risks to the adopted child through contact, as opposed to using professional assessment and judgement to understand which birth relatives pose a risk, and which do not.

Addressing barriers – how we can change our approach

Putting systems in place to achieve change

A wide range of professionals have a role to play in achieving a change of culture. A key task for local authority social workers is to improve their approach to planning contact so it is more individualised and less formulaic. Independent reviewing officers can contribute through a focus on ensuring children's important links are not lost prior to the adoption order being made. Legal professionals can ensure the quality of contact planning, and courts have the power to 'set the tone' for what happens after adoption through questioning plans. Cafcass plays an important role in ensuring that the lifelong needs of the child remain in focus. There is a role for independent birth parent support workers to help parents and birth relatives participate constructively in contact plans.

Adoption social workers and managers have a role in driving change both at a case level (through inputting into children's contact plans) and through changing systems and practices within their agency and with local partners. The role of adoption agencies in galvanising change is key. Workers within those agencies focus solely on adoption and hence often have a greater understanding and knowledge of all the issues around adoption, and particularly the lifelong needs of the adopted person. We have benefited from hearing from RAAs and LAs who already embarked on a programme of culture change to understand the systems

and processes they have used to bring about change. These have included:

- Setting up working groups to agree goals and/or appointing particular people to lead change.
- Changing the 'default' view of contact. A key change for some has been to start with an assumption that direct contact should be maintained unless there are contraindications to doing so.
- Changing language to reflect a new approach. For example, instead of having a 'post adoption contact team' some agencies have renamed this team as the 'staying connected' or 'keeping in touch' team. The aim is to move away from the rather cold and clinical sounding term 'contact' and reflect something that is more family-like and relationship-based.
- Building relationships and collaborations with other professionals, reflecting the need for systemic approach. For example, an agency may run a conference or training event in collaboration with their partner local authorities, Cafcass and the local family justice board.
- The involvement of people with lived experience. Agencies may have a reference group of adoptive parents, birth parents, or adopted young people or adults to identify areas for change and assist with this (eg, through contributing to adopter preparation). Raising the voices of people with lived experience has been seen as particularly useful in terms of changing the attitudes of both professionals and prospective adoptive parents.
- Setting achievable, specific targets. The scale of culture change needed can feel overwhelming, but agencies have initiated change through focusing on one or more specific goals such as refreshing adopter training, encouraging initial meetings between adopters and birth relatives, offering a review of contact in situations where letterbox plans have stalled, or focusing on keeping brothers and sisters in touch.

To help organisations make changes, the UEA team has been commissioned by Adoption England to support 'champions' in RAAs, voluntary adoption agencies and from other key groups such as Cafcass and local authorities to act as catalysts of change within their agencies. Between September 2023 and May 2025 the team from the UEA with Adoption England, are facilitating a programme of online webinars for professionals to provide knowledge and practical examples around how to maintain relationships, and champions are being supported to instigate change through online community of practice workshops.

Changing adoptive parent preparation and training

Adoptive parents need to be partners in change. There is a need for thought about the messaging and language at all stages of communicating with adoptive parents. Information about adoption often includes various aspects of children's needs such as their different ages, disability needs, the need for brothers and sisters to be placed together and the needs of children from minority ethnic groups. Maintaining relationships with the birth family should also be highlighted as important for adopted children.

There is a need to set clear expectations for adoptive parents that maintaining birth family relationships is the starting point for every child, to be ruled out where it is unsafe or unhelpful as opposed to ruled in in exceptional circumstances. A safe space for adoptive parents to air their feelings and anxieties around birth family contact must be created. This is important because prospective adoptive parents depend on the approval of agencies and so may feel obliged to agree to post adoption contact plans. But if their hearts and minds do not change, they may not continue with the plans after the adoption order. In discussions with adoptive parents about maintaining relationships with the birth family, we need to emphasise why this is important to the child and the birth family. But it is vital to also help adopters consider how and why maintaining relationships is supportive of their relationship with their child. Input

from people with lived experience into adoptive parent preparation is likely to be helpful in creating change e.g. birth parents, adopted people or adopters with experience of maintaining relationships can contribute via in person talks, question and answer sessions, or through videos. Opportunities to talk in groups or one-to-one with adoptive parents who have themselves successfully facilitated ongoing birth family relationships is helpful. The input of other adoptive parents is often seen as being more authentic than what professionals say. There are now a wide range of materials available to adoptive parents that they can be directed towards such as podcasts, books, blogs. One particular example is a range of materials by 'The Two Good Mums'¹⁰: an adoptive mother and birthmother who have built a relationship for the sake of their shared children.

Making individualised contact plans

In making individualised plans, the child's social worker has the knowledge of the child's background and of the birth family, but they can often lack expertise and understanding in adoption. Consultation with an adoption social worker can help the child's social worker consider a wide range of options and develop a clear rationale for the 'keeping in touch' plan. There are a range of contact planning tools available to assist with weighing up the strengths and challenges within the child's system such as a planning tool developed by Research in Practice in collaboration with the UEA, and the 'Safe and Meaningful contact guidelines' developed by Psychological Minds. Careful planning is important in identifying opportunities to maintain positive relationships and to ensure we do not expose children to harmful situations. There is a need to assess risks but also to question underlying assumptions about risk. For example, the idea that contact with brothers or sisters placed elsewhere is unsafe if those brothers and sisters are in direct contact with the birth parents should be questioned.

This may be true in some cases, but in others the risks of negative consequences will be very low, and the costs of losing touch with brothers and sisters is too high a price to pay.

Once the child's needs in relation to maintaining relationships have been clearly identified, in searching for adopters at the matching stage these needs must be given priority alongside other needs. It is not good enough to allow the child's contact plans to be driven primarily by the wishes of adoptive parents, or indeed the perceived wishes of as yet unidentified adoptive parents (as happens when contact plans are scaled back lest they 'put off' prospective adopters). It is however vital that once adopters are identified they can have input into the exact shape of contact plans and in determining what support is needed. There is a need to consider how courts can underline the child's need to maintain relationships at the placement order stage, in some cases through the making of a s 26 order which will last until the adoption order is made. As the President recently argued, courts should not be inhibited by a fear of not finding adoptive parents or compromising their autonomy:

'The court's focus is solely on the best interests of the child, not on those of potential future adopters . . .'¹¹

Contact plans should robustly explore all options and decisions should be clearly explained in the care plan, as suggested in the recent Public Law Working Group interim report on adoption.¹² Coram BAAF have recently revised a framework for the *Child Permanence Report*. This now contains detailed sections in which to record details of all members of a child's family and to discuss the rationale for contact (or lack of contact) with each person.

Digital options for contact can be considered as set out in a consultation by

¹⁰ www.twogoodmums.co.uk.

¹¹ See 1 above.

¹² www.judiciary.uk/guidance-and-resources/public-law-working-group-interim-report-recommendations-for-best-practice-in-respect-of-adoption.

the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.¹³ My colleagues and I have recently evaluated the first pilot of a digital platform called ‘Letter Swap’. This is designed to facilitate mediated exchanges of information such as letters, short messages, voice notes and videos through an online platform. The platform, developed by Link Maker, has been piloted in five RAAs. The evaluation found benefits of the digital system in terms of the ease of administration of letterbox such as having a repository of letters in one place, automatic reminders when letters were due, and the ability for users to track the progress of the letter throughout the system. Where people wanted a different way of keeping in touch, and to move towards a closer relationship, Letter Swap could provide a means of doing this. For example some families wanted to exchange messages or other media more frequently, and without necessarily waiting for an agency check. In some such cases using the digital platform had a transformative positive effect on contact plans. As one adoptive parent described ‘for me it just removes barriers and makes it a bit more informal . . . It just seems more personal’. But digital solutions are not a panacea to all the problems. Not all birth families can access digital systems either because of lack of skills and competence or just simply not having access to digital devices or wi-fi. The aims and goals of birth and adoptive families must align as they must in any form of contact, and professionals must be able to put in extra work to support the change of plan, for example by offering a tailored review of contact.

Focussing on relationship building

Contact is not just a letter or a meeting; we need to focus on the relationships that underpin these processes. Building better connections and collaboration between birth and adoptive families is key. Ideas around how we can achieve this include:

- Providing opportunities for adoptive parents and others involved in contact (such as birth parents, carers of siblings, grandparents et cetera) to meet in

person. This can be useful with letterbox in terms of knowing who you are writing to. Where contact is in person it is useful for the adults to have time to talk about the plans outside of the actual meeting with the child.

- Supporting relationships intensively at the start of the journey of maintaining relationships can help get everything off to a good start. For example, facilitating early meetings and working with families before, during and after the contact meeting to discuss their aspirations, worries and experiences and can help enable families to move towards facilitating contact themselves.
- Where it is necessary for a professional to be present when families meet up (and the first question is whether that is necessary) it is important to take a relational approach to ‘facilitating’ as opposed to ‘supervising’ those meetings.
- There is a need to think about how we can support adoptive parents to be open in their communication with children such as through offering additional training as their children approach the teenage years, a time when questions often come up.
- A key support wanted by many is to be able to contact a named person or service to discuss the progress of the contact plan.
- Offering reviews at key developmental stages for the child and where something changes in the network of the birth or adoptive family. For example, if the birth mother has another child.

Conclusion

A closed model of adoption fails to respect that children have an identity and relationships before they are adopted. A new approach is needed and achieving this change requires significant shifts in embedded cultures, as well as the allocation of resources. A wide range of people can influence thinking and practice around contact, and hence culture change must be

13 www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/adoption-connections.

Articles

system wide. There are encouraging signs that the will to make these changes is growing and is starting to be acted upon in some pioneering agencies. Prioritizing this aspect of children's needs is crucial if adoption is to be a relevant and ethical pathway to permanence for children.

For further reading on the topic of adoption, see 'Is the wind of change about to blow through adoption?' by Andrew Bainham in the February 2024 issue of Family Law ([2024] Fam Law 176).