

Supporting direct contact after adoption

This study is part of the Adoption Research Initiative (ARi), a group of major research projects commissioned by the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The dissemination of key messages from the initiative was funded by the Department for Education.

The study was undertaken by Dr. Elsbeth Neil and her colleagues from the University of East Anglia¹ and it builds on an earlier stage of the project involving a survey of services to support contact². Data was gathered from 2006 – 2009.

This summary is based on a longer research brief and the full report of the study³. It reviews the methodology and findings and highlights the key messages from the research. Information about other resources from the study is available at the [ARi website](#).

1. Background to the study

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 states that adopted children, birth relatives, and adoptive parents have the right to ask for an assessment of their needs for support after adoption, including support with contact arrangements. A significant minority of adopted children are likely to have direct contact with a sibling, birth parent, grandparent or another member of their extended birth family.

Direct contact is a complex area which has the potential both to pose risks and offer benefits to all parties. There has been little research to date on how to support contact arrangement in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for the child and in turn for the child's adoption network. This project was commissioned in order to begin to fill this gap.

¹ The full research team was Dr. Elsbeth Neil, Julie Young and Jeanette Cossar, University of East Anglia, Dr. Christine Jones, now at the University of Edinburgh and Dr. Paula Lorgelly, now at the University of Monash, Australia.

² See [Summary 8](#) in this series

³ The summary was drafted by Mary Beek, Professional Adviser to the Adoption Policy team, Department for Education, in consultation with the research team.

2. What was the purpose of the study?

The study aimed to explore the following questions:

- What are the key characteristics of adoptive parents, adopted children and birth relatives who are involved in complex⁴ direct contact arrangements?
- What are the experiences of adoptive parents and birth relatives involved in direct contact arrangements?
- What types of direct contact support services do birth relatives and adoptive parents report using?
- What are adoptive parents' and birth relatives' experiences of using direct contact support services?
- How much do direct contact support services cost?

3. How was the study done?

The study was conducted in collaboration with eight agencies: one adoption support agency; six local authorities; and one consortium of local authorities.

The research involved three strands:

The adoptive families study.

Interviews were carried out with 51 adoptive parents and four long-term foster carers who were involved in direct contact arrangements. The interviews were followed up approximately 16 months later, and 53 people (96%) took part at the second stage.

The birth relatives study.

Thirty-nine birth relatives took part in interviews spanning three generations in the birth family. Ninety per cent took part in the second round of interviews.

The economic analysis.

The economic analysis estimated the cost of providing contact support services to birth relatives and adoptive parents over a 12-month period. In order to do this, case workers

⁴ 'Complex' cases were defined as those where agencies had an ongoing role in relation to the contact.

recorded the time spent on contact support activities and this was costed using published unit costs. These figures were combined with data on service use to calculate individual costs⁵ for individual service users.

4. What were the key findings?

The characteristics of those involved

The researchers found that all parties brought to the contact arrangements a range of strengths and also a range of potential risk factors. These can be summarised as follows:

Adopters and their children

- An important area was felt to be the degree of 'openness' to the birth family that the adopters felt and communicated to their child. Five indicators of 'openness' were measured: communication with the child about adoption; comfort with, and promotion of, dual connection; empathy for the adopted child; communication with the birth family; and empathy for the birth family. The majority of adoptive parents scored highly, suggesting that they were bringing valuable resources to the contact situation.
- Three-quarters of children in the study were two years or older when placed with their adoptive parents. Many were continuing to struggle with the impact of their early histories and they had ongoing psychological issues or developmental problems that made it harder for them to manage complex situations.
- Over half the children (51%) were having direct contact with a birth relative who had played a significant role as a carer and who had neglected or abused them. Contact in such circumstances may be more emotionally complex for children than seeing a birth relative without this relationship history.
- A combined score was computed to quantify the strengths and risks that both the adopters and their children were bringing to the contact situation. In this sample of complex cases, a minority of families had many more risk factors than strengths (11%), one in five families (38%) had an even mixture and just over half of families had many more strengths than risk factors (51%).

Birth relatives

- The mental health of birth relatives was measured using the Brief Symptom Inventory and over half the birth relatives (55%) had scores within the clinical range.
- A measure was taken regarding how far the birth relative could accept the child's dual connection. Over 70% of birth relatives scored mainly highly on this measure indicating that they could support the child as a member of the adoptive family. A minority of birth relatives remained resistant to accepting the adoptive placement, and in these cases contact may be difficult for the child or adoptive parents.
- A measure of 'feelings about the outcomes of adoption for the child' indicated that three-quarters of birth relatives felt that the adoption had worked out well for the child and many commented on how the direct contact had helped them to reach this position.
- In comparison, 60% of birth relatives still had some quite significant problems in managing the negative consequences of adoption for themselves. For example, dealing with difficult feelings and re-engaging with wider life activities remained problematic.
- A combined score was calculated to quantify the strengths and risks that the birth relatives were bringing to contact. Scores were spread across the range with 42% having scores in the top third of the range indicating more strengths than risks.

Adoptive parents' experiences of contact

- Contact arrangements were classified by the researchers into two groups using both quantitative and qualitative data. Between 42 and 45% of cases were 'working very well' and between 55 to 58% of cases had 'unresolved issues'. Whether or not contact was working well changed, over time, for about a quarter of families, indicating the dynamic nature of contact arrangements.
- Adoptive families where there were more strengths than risk factors and those who had higher 'openness' scores were more likely to be experiencing contact that was working well.
- The benefits of contact as perceived by adoptive parents included maintaining relationships for the child, helping the

⁵ Curtis, L (2007) *The Unit Costs of health and Social Care*, Canterbury: Personal Social Services Research Unit.

child deal with identity issues and strengthening adoptive family relationships.

- All adoptive parents described challenges related to contact. These included negative reactions from the child, difficult relationships with the birth relatives, confidentiality issues and difficult feelings for the adopters themselves.

Birth relatives' experiences of contact

- Adult siblings were mainly very satisfied with contact arrangements, despite many complex issues that had emerged. The satisfaction of birth parents and grandparents was more varied. However, almost all birth relatives expressed great pleasure at being able to see the adopted child. Many would have liked more contact but were reluctant to express this in case their wishes were perceived negatively by others.
- Birth relatives' scores on the 'coping with adoption' measure significantly predicted whether or not they were satisfied with contact. Those who were coping better with adoption were more likely to be satisfied with contact than those who were coping less well.
- Birth relatives perceived a number of benefits of contact. These included feeling that contact was beneficial to the child as well as to themselves. Many birth relatives felt they could make a positive contribution to their child's life in the adoptive family and some felt it beneficial for the child to see their two families get along together.
- Birth relatives also identified a number of ways in which they found contact could be challenging. These included the loss of parental control and a parental role with the child, an ongoing fear that they might lose the relationship with the child and a sense that they were perceived by the adopters and social workers as a source of risk.

Contact support

The research demonstrated that adopters and birth relatives who are sustaining face to face contact after adoption must build and sustain complex relationships, understand their own and each other's roles, make sense of different family boundaries, cope with the 'strangeness' of the event and deal with difficult feelings.

Key messages

The combined experiences of the birth relatives and the adopters provide some important indicators for developing a sensitive and effective service:

- Ensure that all workers, including contact supervisors, are experienced in understanding and managing the dynamics of adoption and contact, and have the capacity and training needed to be sensitive and empathic to all parties.
- Ensure consistency of workers wherever possible as this contributes positively to the building of relationships between the adoptive family and the birth family.
- Be sensitive to the 'balance of power' in decision making regarding the contact arrangements. Each case will require a comfortable balance between the agency and the adoptive parents. Involve birth relatives in decision making wherever possible and comfortable.
- Ensure that contact support plans address the needs of the child, the adopters and the birth relatives.
- Review contact arrangements regularly so that support is forward thinking, anticipating rather than merely responding to challenges that arise.
- Explain and agree rules and boundaries clearly with all parties. If there are perceived risks from the birth relative, these should be explained, along with the relevant protective steps that are to be taken.
- Be sensitive to the emotional impact of contact on all parties. Ensure that arrangements take this into account and that all involved have opportunities to talk about difficult feelings after the event.

The costs of supporting contact

- The 'average' adoptive parent was estimated to have used 12 support services over a 12 month period at an average cost of £999. This included three adoptive parents who incurred no cost (as they did not use any services) and some users who greatly utilised the services that were on offer; the maximum cost was £4,052.
- The average birth relative received 8.9 services (range 0 to 23) and the average costs over the 12-month period was £757, with the maximum being £1,984.
- The number of missed appointments for adoptive parents and birth relatives was very low. This could reflect the high levels of commitment of both parties to the continuation of contact, and may indicate that both parties need and value contact support services.

Problematic and successful contact

- The research showed that all contact arrangements involve some degree of challenge, and in all cases some level of benefit was also apparent. The balance between these two sets of factors was different in each case.
- The researchers drew together the data on the characteristics of all parties and their experiences of contact. From this they were able to identify some of the factors associated with both problematic and successful contact, which are summarised below. This provides some helpful indicators for case sensitive decision-making regarding contact after adoption. Additionally, these indicators might help to identify which direct contact arrangements are likely to be relatively unproblematic and which are likely to be challenging and therefore require a higher level of support.

Factors associated with problematic contact

- Birth relatives have poor adjustment to the adoption and poor acceptance of the child's dual connection.
- Birth relatives or adopter(s) have poor commitment or negative attitudes towards the contact.
- A lack of connection is evident between the child and the birth relative during contact or there is a fear of loss of connection resulting from the structure or quality of the contact (e.g. infrequent, highly formal).
- There is a lack of trust and insecurity in the relationship between the child and the adopters.
- The child is struggling to cope with emotional and behavioural problems.
- The contact includes a birth relative who has severely neglected or abused the child.
- There are poor relationships between the adopters and the birth relative.

Factors associated with successful contact

- There is a commitment to contact, a positive attitude and an awareness of the benefits on all sides.
- There is a clear connection between the child and the birth relative alongside a developing sense of trust and security in the adoptive family.
- The birth relative can accept the child's adoption and their own change of role in the child's life.
- There are 'good enough' relationships between the adoptive family and the birth relative.
- There is a consensus between the birth relative and the adoptive parent(s) about what is in the child's best interests.
- Birth relatives and adopters can make efforts to demonstrate that they value each other's roles in the child's life.

5. Limitations and strengths of the study

Limitations

- The views of adopted children and young people were not included in the research.
- The research did not include contact support provided by specialist services in the independent sector
- The unit costs employed on the project may underestimate the true cost of contact support.

Strengths

- The proposal for the study was independently and anonymously peer-reviewed before the work was commissioned.
- The report was independently and anonymously peer-reviewed before its publication.
- The project used an experienced research team with significant knowledge and skills in researching adoption.
- Adoptive parents and birth relatives were successfully involved as consultants to the research process
- The data was collected from a number of key informants: adoptive parents, birth relatives, and service providers. The retention of service users over the follow-up period was exceptionally high, as was the return of data from case.