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in practice

contact
after adoption

**Adoptive parents' and birth
relatives' views of contact**

Elsbeth Neil

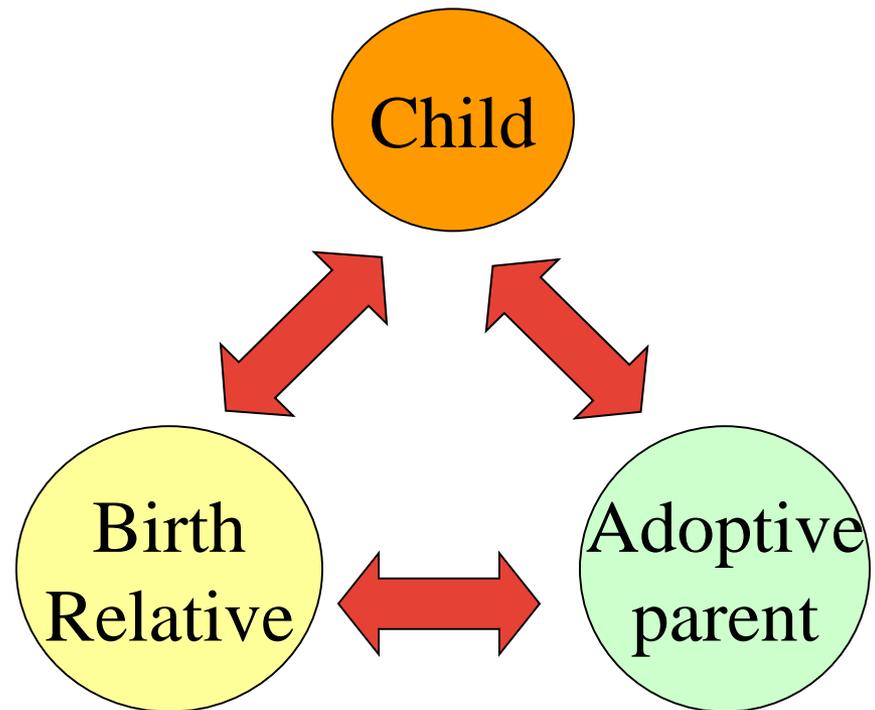
Dartington

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To understand contact we need to think of it as a whole system (Neil & Howe 2004)

Contact is not an event, but a dynamic, transactional Experience

How each person behaves, thinks and feels in contact can change how the other parties behave, think and feel



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How did adoptive parents feel contact had helped them?

- › Finding out information about their child's birth family history
- › Understanding the risks in the child's genetic background
- › Honesty and closeness in the adoptive family
- › A foundation for future contact
- › Reducing their anxieties about the birth family
- › Helping their child with issues of loss, rejection and identity

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Understanding the child's background

...now we've met his mother and talked to his maternal grandmother over the years, it's made us understand Sean's potential weaknesses and strengths genetically...and it's helped us to maybe steer him away from certain situations.

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Honesty and closeness in the adoptive family

- > Child knows that important information has not been withheld from them
- > Contact as a shared 'whole family' activity
- > Parents can support child's emotions
- > Opening up talk about adoption:

"when you have the contact it helps to break the ice and talk...when the letter comes you can share it together"

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A foundation for future contact

I think the advantages are that if at some point in the future Blake does want to meet his birth mum and sister, then that will make that meeting much more comfortable for him. They won't be a total strangers him.

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Reducing anxiety about the birth family

For me, 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. So it's not going to open up a whole series of questions as to what does this mean, what does she (daughter) want, is she going to want her more than me, because we've come on a journey with them.

Adoptive mother

Supporting the child

And for Kirsty to know that she had everyone important to her thinking about her, because Mum and Dad absolutely doted on her and she knew I felt the same way. To have all these people giving you that extra special attention, all together, and accepting and actually enjoying the situation. I just felt it added to her sense of well-being in a way that couldn't happen if you didn't have contact.

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Benefits for birth relatives

- Close relationships (grandparents): *"We've had some fun with him. We've watched him grow up. Not on a photograph. We've felt him grow up"*.
- Knowing child is well and happy: *"I've got an overall picture and that is lovely. It's just peace of mind really"*
- Offering something positive to child
- Easing feelings of guilt and loss

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Offering something positive to child

I'm sure it helps them to know the other side, the birth family, and to know that they're important. I mean (adoptive mother), bless her, she said that. It's one of the last things she said was 'don't worry, you will always be important to them'.

Birth mother

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Easing feelings of guilt and loss

...after he was born, I knew he'd gone into care but I didn't know where at the time...and I used to work in a supermarket and I used to look at all the babies in prams and wonder if it was him. And I would have been like that probably, until now, wondering how he was and what he looked like. So no, I'm glad we did have the contact.

Birth grandmother

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Challenges for adoptive parents (direct contact)

> Practicalities

> Roles and
boundaries

> Emotional
strain

“I don’t suppose I ever looked forward to it because it was always emotional...I suppose I felt sorry for [birth mum]...and I worried about how Luke felt about it. My feelings were concern for them really.”

(Adoptive mother)

Challenges for adopters (indirect)

- › Knowing what to say
- › Knowing what to share
- › No response

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No response: decision to cease sending

- > Is it wanted?
- > Child wishes to cease
- > No benefit to child

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No response: decision to continue sending

- Honouring a commitment
- Using contact to open adoption related conversations
- Empathy for birth parents
- A foundation for possible meeting in the future

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Challenges of contact for birth relatives

- Protecting confidentiality of the adopters (direct)
- Knowing what to say – positives and negatives (indirect)
- 'Surface level' (indirect)
- Ending without reason (indirect)
- Role anxiety

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Role anxiety when contact changes

- How would you describe your relationship with Lily?

Friends. Not quite. I suppose it is a friend. It's an okay relationship, I think we're gradually getting to know each other...I've offered my support to Lily and said 'if you need anything' but then I think 'well she doesn't really know me, would she ask me?' I don't think she would ask me for help actually because who am I?...There's always that question of what kind of relationship it's going to be?

(Birth mother; met adopted daughter age 18)

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Ending without reason

- Imagining the worst
- Have I done something wrong?
- Grieving process stalled
- Dreading the future

Ending without reason

Going through his mind he could be thinking 'why didn't they take *me?*'...and then as his siblings got older and gone to college and university we said they'd both graduated, I wonder if that sort of made Kyle think that he were either missing out on something, or just didn't want to know

Grandparent and carer for adopted
child's siblings

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Dreading the future

He's 17 in December which really scares me...

Interviewer: Why does that scare you?

Because I keep thinking he's going to come and knock on the door. I'm really starting to get a bit twitchy about that. It's really, really scary. Because I don't know what (adoptive mother) has told him. Even though she broke the contact, I don't know if she still told him about me. (Birth mother)

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Key elements of supporting contact

