The Role of Contact in
Contemporary Adoption

Slides prepared by Professor Beth Neil

This presentation reviews the evidence from research about different types of contact after adoption, with a range of birth relatives. It draws heavily on two studies carried out at UEA, but also makes reference to other research. If intending to make a presentation using these slides it will be important for the presenter to understand the two main studies that this material draws on. These studies are:

- the longitudinal "contact after adoption" study which has looked at the impact of letter and face-to-face contact with adult birth relatives on adopted children, birth relatives, and adoptive parents.

- The "supporting direct contact" study which focused just on face-to-face contact arrangements, drawing largely on the perspectives of adoptive parents and birth relatives (including adult birth siblings). This study had a strong focus on how agencies can best support direct contact arrangements.

Information about these two studies is available elsewhere on the website.

A history of questions about post adoption contact...

Q: Post adoption contact! That's a really bad idea isn't it?

A: Not necessarily

Q: Contact sounds great! perhaps everyone should have it?

A: Not necessarily

Q: When and how does contact work/not work?

A: At last, a good question!

This slide is mainly a way of discussing how the most interesting and useful research questions about contact consider when and how contact works, and when and how it might not be a good idea. More general questions about whether contact is good or bad are not helpful because the answer is always "it depends on the individual situation".

"It must be right for the child. All children are different so there must be very flexible guidelines around contact. I think it's a case of experience, you need workers who are experienced enough to be able to say 'I think this is what you should do with this child in this family in this particular case'. But even that must remain flexible as the children change."
(Adoptive mother)

This is a quote from the adoptive mother who took part in the "contact after adoption" study and it sums up the need for individual and flexible planning for contact, and the role of experienced workers.

The **'Contact after adoption'** study: Face-to-face and indirect contact with adult birth relatives for children adopted under age 4 (Neil et al, 2014/2015)

- Longitudinal: pre-school, middle childhood, late adolescence

- Birth relatives, adopted children/young people & adoptive parents

- 45 adoptive families and 32 birth families at Time 3 (mean age 18)

The **'Supporting direct contact'** study: Face-to-face, agency mediated contact (Neil et al, 2011)

- 55 adoptive parents

- 39 birth relatives

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Here very brief details of the two main research studies underpinning the presentation are given. The publications referred to on the slide are:

Neil, E., Beek, M. & Ward, E. (2015) Contact after adoption: a longitudinal study of post adoption contact arrangements. London: CoramBAAF.
Neil, E., Beek, M. & Ward, E. (2014) Contact after adoption: a longitudinal study of adopted young people and their adoptive parents and birth relatives. London: BAAF.
Neil, E., Cossar, J., Jones, C., Lorgelly, P. and Young, J. (2011), *Supporting direct contact after adoption.* London: BAAF

Contact pathways over time (Neil et al, 2014/15)

- Face-to-face much less common than 'letterbox'
- Most contact infrequent and voluntary
- Many contact arrangements 'fell by the wayside' – 1/3 of YP had lost all contact by age 18
- Contact with *parents* least enduring
- Indirect contact less enduring than face-to-face
- Reductions often driven by wishes of adopters or child; some birth relatives had died
- Some increases in contact in adolescence inc. though social media

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This slide illustrates how the plans for postadoption contact made at the time a child is placed for adoption are highly likely to vary over time. There seems to be particular in challenges for birth parents in sustaining contact, whereas for other relatives such as grandparents or siblings the arrangements might be more likely to endure. Indirect contact can be very hard to keep going across the years. One of the key points to make here is that the most common form of contact tends to be indirect contact with birth parents (particularly birth mothers) - yet, without support, this type of contact may well not be sustained. So there needs to be more support for this type of contact and/or more consideration of other types of contact (such as face-to-face) with parents or with other birth relatives.
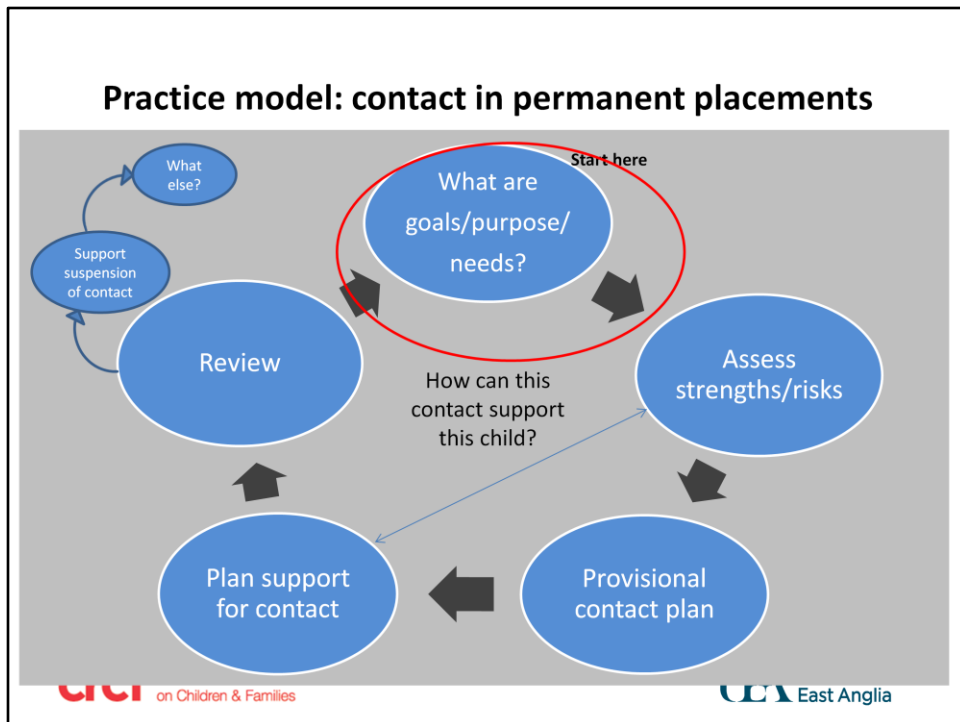
What do adopted children need?

- Security, love and to 'belong' in their new family
- Knowledge of their birth family, their personal history and 'why' they needed to be adopted
- To manage feelings of loss and separation
- To make sense of being in more than one family
- To recover from early harm

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I have put this slide in here to make the point that when thinking about the contact needs of the child, you need to think about all their needs. We need to question how contact might help the child with some of the needs listed on this slide, but we also need to remain open to the possibility that poor quality contact could undermine some of these needs being met.

## How does contact work out? *(Neil et al, 2011; Neil et al, 2014/5)*

- Every case is different; no one type of contact is best in all cases
- Indirect contact often *more* complex than direct
- Contact can have benefits for child, adopters and birth relatives: information, managing loss/dealing with anxiety, maintaining open communication
- Contact works for the child when the adults collaborate and respect each others different roles
- Contact does usually not often affect child's overall development; it can promote identity development.

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This slide is fairly self-explanatory but in order to explain all these points in more detail it is helpful to be familiar with the underpinning research projects.

Practice model: contact in permanent placements

- What else?
- Support suspension of contact
- What are goals/purpose/needs? (Start here)
- Review
- How can this contact support this child?
- Assess strengths/risks
- Plan support for contact
- Provisional contact plan

The starting point for thinking about contact should always be the needs of the child. There should be a clear goal for having contact with everyone having the same focus on what the child is going to get out of it. Contact will however also affect adoptive parents and birth relatives and how contact will meet the needs of these people should also be considered at an early stage.
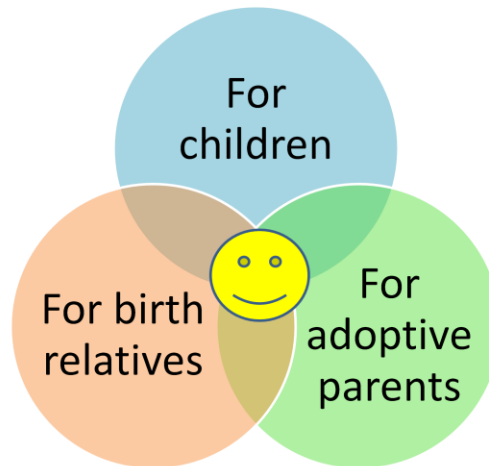
This slide illustrates that the most successful contact arrangements are ones in which there are benefits for children, for adoptive parents and for birth relatives. If contact has no benefits for one or more of these parties then it's probably going to peter out.

Potential benefits for adoptive parents

- Finding out about their child's background and birth relatives
- Helping them communicate with their child
- Helping them manage anxieties: *"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."*
- Bringing them closer to their child

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I think it actually makes them feel more part of our family… Every contact we come away feeling more secure really…more certain that they need us as parents and that they are our children (Adoptive parent)

[Birth father] was a right mess and very quiet and very, so young looking, and you just felt quite sorry for him really … we don't think of them as these ogres anymore. It could have been very easy just to be very negative about him forever. (Adoptive parent)

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Potential benefits for birth relatives

- Mitigating feelings of loss and guilt
- Reassurance about the child
- Being about to still contribute something to the child
- Maintaining a valued relationship

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Young people's satisfaction with openness (Neil et al, 2013)

- Satisfaction with contact varied within all levels openness; it was associated with contact reliability/predictability more than type
- Dissatisfaction often associated with gaps in contact
- Most saw some benefits in having contact and argued that the option should be there:

"Even if the contact is only brief.. I think social workers should ensure that the option of staying in contact is always left open"

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This slide draws on the interviews with 32 adopted young people in the longitudinal study. They had experienced a range of contact from no contact through to regular, frequent, unmediated face-to-face contact. Whatever the amount or type of contact, if the contact had been reasonably predictable and had been kept up over the years young people tended to be positive about it. This was true even when the amount of contact was very minimal. So young people who were unhappy about their level of contact tended to be those where the contact had not gone according to plan and had been unreliable or even stopped. Some young people were unhappy because they wanted to be in touch with birth relatives but they encountered barriers in reaching these people. In particular several young people mentioned "gaps" in contact in relation to their birth father.

The vast majority of young people supported the idea that there should be at the very least a minimal amount of contact to allow the adopted person to open things up in the future should they so wish.

Benefits of contact for adopted young people

Information Needs

Relationships

Openness in Adoptive Family

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In brief, young people valued contact because it helped them find out information about their background. They also felt it was a visible sign of their adoptive parents will willingness to talk and think about their birth family. In some cases (particularly contact with grandparents or siblings) contact led to the child developing or sustaining a relationship with their birth relatives. These points are illustrated on the next two slides.
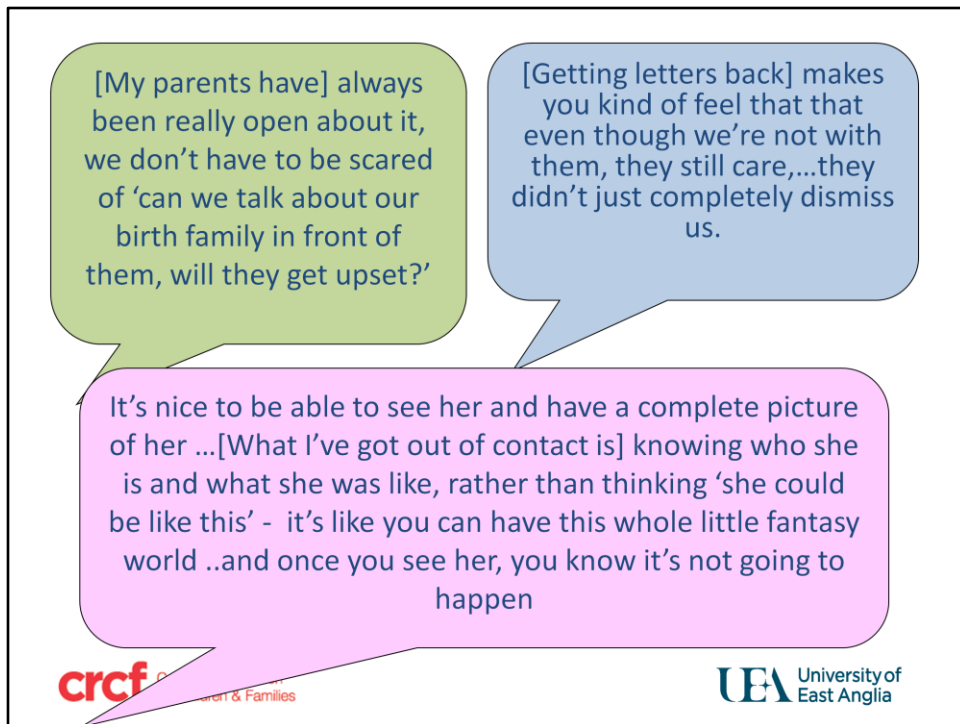
Looking first at the quote in green-this was a young person who had letter contact with her grandmother. She had also met her birth parents as a young adult. When she talks about her "parents" she is of course talking about her adoptive parents.
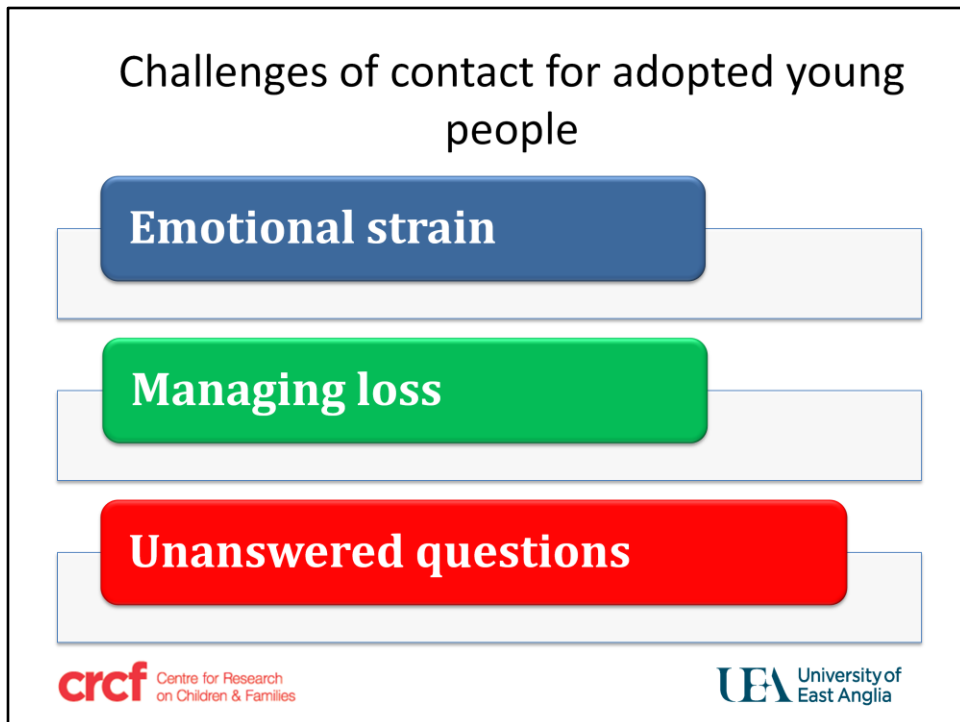
Looking at the quote on the grey/blue background this illustrates the theme from a number of adopted young people-that it was important to them to know that their birth family still thought about them and cared about them and contact could be a visible sign of this.

The final quote on the pink background is from a young person who had face-to-face contact with her birth mother who suffered from a mental illness. A number of young people in this situation, like this young person, felt that seeing their birth parent had helped them to be realistic about why they needed to be adopted. They didn't necessarily form a relationship with their birth parent, but they did get a lot of valuable information about their birth parent's needs and situation, and they were reassured that their birth parent still cared about them.

17 year, face-to-face contact with birth mother and grandmother

She was like a proper nan…She'd do stupid little nan things, and even though you only used to see her at this place, I don't know, I'd go and give her a hug. I really liked seeing her.

This quote shows that in some cases face-to-face contact can be uncomplicated and can lead to warm and supportive relationships between children and their birth relatives. This is mainly likely to be the case with grandparent contact, as opposed to birth parent contact.

Challenges of contact for adopted young people

- Emotional strain
- Managing loss
- Unanswered questions

Contact was rarely seen as either totally good or totally bad by young people-there was always a balance of benefits and challenges. An element of emotional strain was present in most contact arrangements that this varied from very mild to quite stressful. Again, having contact with grandparents or siblings seem to carry lower levels of emotional strain compared to contact with birth parents.

The point about "managing loss" is that where contact was not sustained (and particularly where birth relatives dropped out of contact or even died) this could be difficult for young people. It was also difficult for young people if they wanted to be in touch with a birth relative but no contact existed.

Finally, although contact could answer a lot of questions it didn't always tell the young person everything they wanted to know. Particularly when contact was through letters, some of the more difficult questions that the young person might of had like "what were the reasons why my parents couldn't look after me/decided to place before adoption" were very difficult to discuss in a letter.
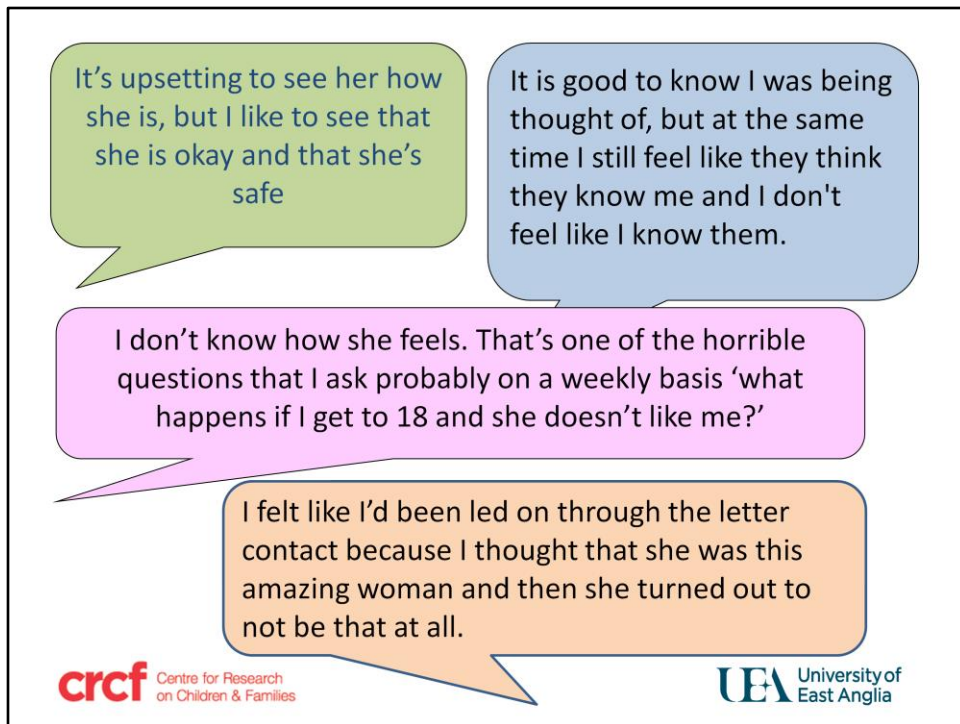
The green quote is from a young person whose mother had a mental illness - the quote is self-explanatory.

The blue/grey quote illustrates something of the "emotional strain" of contact meetings - this is a young person who felt that her grandparents were much more emotionally invested in her that she was in them. This made contact feel a bit strange for her, but overall she still valued retaining this connection.

The pink quote is from a young person whose adoptive parents had consistently written to his birth mother but she had not written back. This was very difficult for him, and instead of contact answering questions it just raised questions for him particularly about not might happen in the future.

The orange quote is from a young person who felt that the letters she had exchanged with her birth mother had not helped her to be realistic about her birth mum. When she met her birth mum at age 16 she felt very disappointed.

Contact and adoptees' development :
(Neil et al, 2013)

- Adoption mostly worked well to provide children with a supportive and loving family for life.
- Many young people had developmental issues that increased or emerged in adolescence.
- Contact unrelated to overall development
- Contact *sometimes* needed to take 'a back seat' when children were struggling

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In the early days of postadoption contact some people questioned whether contact might harm adoptees' overall development, or whether it might promote their development. The longitudinal study (in line with a number of other research projects" suggested that postadoption contact is generally irrelevant to young people's overall development. Whether young people were doing well (in terms of having emotional and behavioural problems) generally related to factors like the impact of early harm.

However in both the UEA contact studies it was apparent that where young people had a lot of emotional and behavioural problems they often needed more support with birth family contact, and as the final quote shows some young people needed to take a break from contact in their teenage years.

Adoptive identity (Neil et al, 2013)
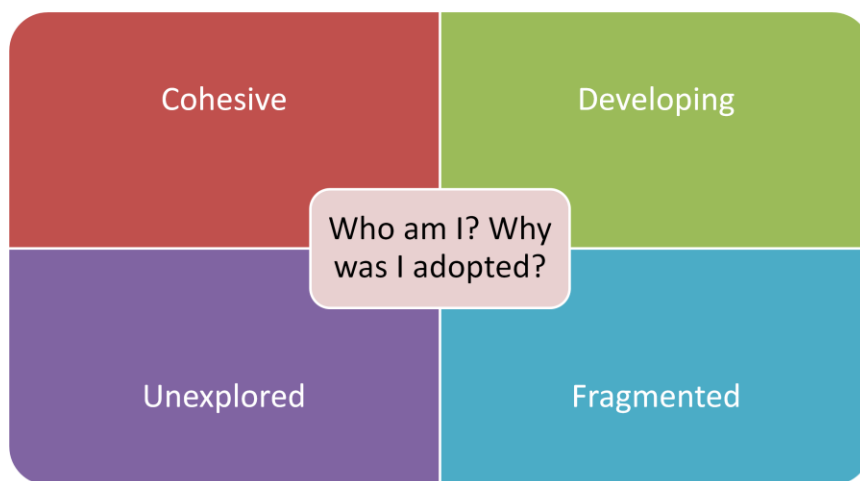
| Cohesive | Developing |
| Unexplored | Fragmented |

Who am I? Why was I adopted?

This slide introduces the four patterns of identity development that emerged from our analysis of the interviews with 32 adopted young people. The groups are described briefly on the next slide, but a full account of these identity patterns is given in chapter 9 of Neil, Beek and Ward (2015). The numbers of young people in each group is given below.

Cohesive n= 16
Unexplored n= 5
Developing n=5
Fragmented n= 6

Identity patterns

- Unexplored (N=5): YP at ease with very simple adoption story

- Developing (n=5): feeling 'there's got to be more to it'

- Cohesive (n=16): worked through, balanced view of adoption that made sense to YP

- Fragmented (n=6): strong negative feelings, lack of coherence in adoption narrative

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All I know is when my birth mum was born, her mum didn't have a very good upbringing so didn't really know how to look after her…so when it came to having kids she didn't know how to bring us up…she mixed with the wrong people and with drugs …it was safer for us to be adopted. [Meeting my birth mum], it just kind of made me understand in a way why she did it and that …even though she's part of my life, she's not a big part of my life. (Cohesive)

This is an example of the young person rated as having a "cohesive" adoptive identity. The key features of this category were as follows:

- high levels of exploration about adoption
- detailed, coherent stories that seemed realistic
- thoughtful about their own feelings and the perspectives of others
- were 'at ease' with their adoption story, even if this was difficult
- emotional responses were appropriate, but difficult feelings were not overwhelming
- strong sense of connection to adoptive family
- saw the reason for their adoption as understandable, necessary or justified
- views of birth family varied from case to case

- The young person in this case had some ongoing letter contact with her birth grandmother, and had met her birth mother as a teenager. Her adoptive parents were quite "communicatively open". She was 17 when we interviewed her.

I have no idea [why I was adopted], it could be completely different. That's the story that I've been told, but I have no idea. It's that uncertainty which hurts.

What does adoption mean to you?
I would say um just the word, not necessarily my opinion; I would say 'I was taken away from my birth parents to have a better life'. It doesn't necessarily mean that's how it happened or that's what happened…I don't know if you understand the degree that it bothers me…and it can bother me daily, even now, its like a burn
(Fragmented)

A fragmented adoptive identity: key themes

- narratives about adoption lacked coherence and were often rigid, 'stuck' or seemed to be 'going round in circles'
- some people avoided exploration of adoption because they were very anxious about what they might find
- strong presence of negative feelings such as anger, sadness or loss - at life in general, or specifically about adoption
- four young people sent felt a connection with their adoptive parents, but two young people had a shaky sense of belonging in their adoptive family.
- ambivalent feelings about birth family
- feelings that being adopted was a source of stigma or emotional turbulence

- This young person was very troubled by his adoption story. Although he had been given some information about why he had been adopted, he did not find this story believable or authentic. You can see that he has strong negative feelings and despite ruminating about this issue a lot he cannot resolve these negative feelings. His adoption story makes no sense to him.

Was contact linked to identity?

- 84% of those with 'cohesive' identity were having birth family contact (versus 44% of others)
- Levels of adoptive parent adoption communication openness higher for those in 'cohesive identity' group, and lowest in 'fragmented' group.
- Key role of adoptive parents in facilitating identity development though communication and contact

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In the longitudinal contact after adoption study you can see from this slide that we did find some indications that where young people had ongoing birth family contact, and where their adoptive parents were "communicatively open", they tended to have a cohesive adoptive identity. There is not a straightforward relationship between openness and identity development however-some people had a cohesive identity despite having no or little contact, some people had a lot of contact but did not have a cohesive identity. The role of adoptive parents in helping young people think about and emotionally process their adoption story came across very strongly in interviews with both parents and young people.
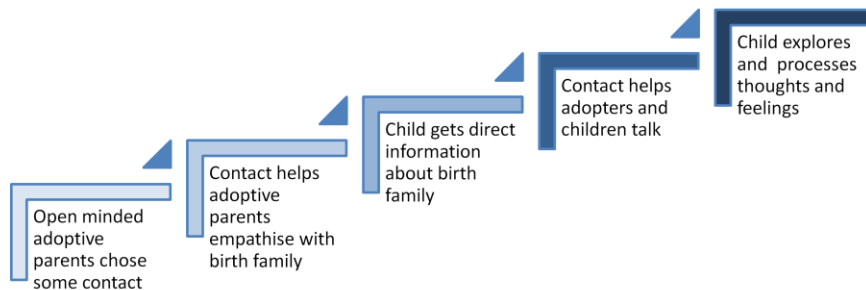
This slide illustrates some ideas about how adopted young people may come to understand their own adoption story both through having contact with their birth family, and having communicatively open adoptive parents. It is important to remember (as comes up later in this presentation) that adoptive parents who are willing to promote birth family contact tend to be those who are generally more "communicatively open".

Practice model: contact in permanent placements
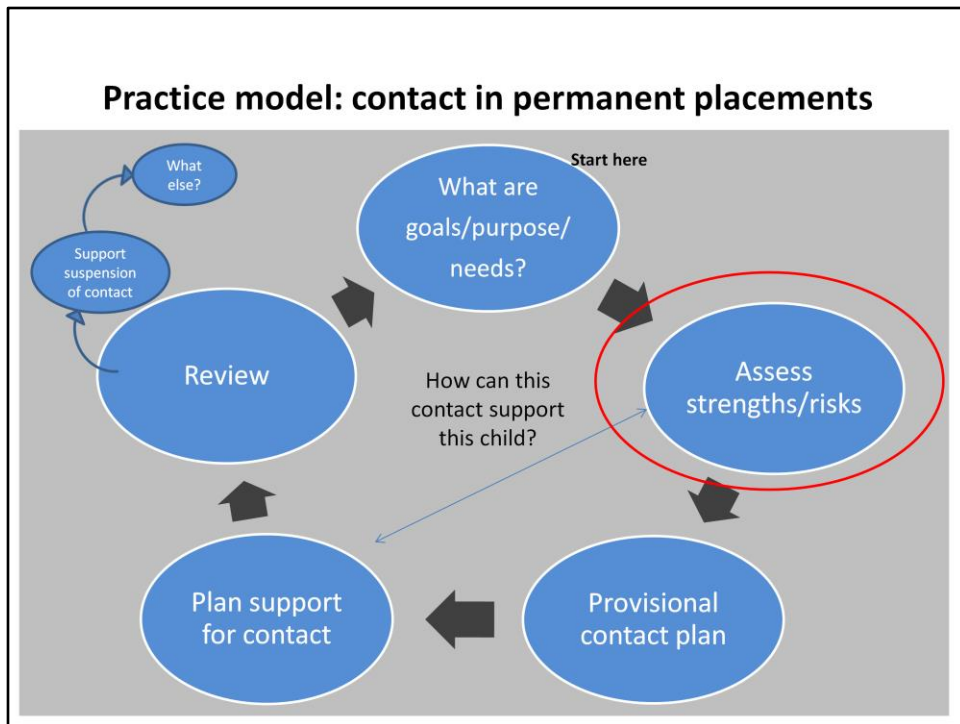
Once the initial process of thinking about the child's needs and the goals and purpose of contact has been carried out, the next stage is to consider the strengths and vulnerabilities of everyone involved, and to think about any risks relating to contact. This will enable you to think about what type of contact might be feasible/realistic and likely to be sustained, the potential quality of this contact, and the support that you may need to put in place to make contact work. This then informs the provisional contact plan.

Assessing strengths & risks: children

Relationship history

Nature of current relationship with birth relative

Wishes & feelings

Age & development

- Younger placed children with fewer problems can cope best with contact, *but they may need it less*
- Older children with more problems may find contact harder to cope with, *but they may need it more.*

There is a lot of information about factors that are associated with more successful contact in the "supporting direct contact" study. We found that contact was more likely to be successful for children who are younger placement, and where the birth relative involved in contact had not been responsible for any abuse or neglect. Children who did not have emotional and behavioural problems also found contact easier to manage. This is not to say that direct contact should be restricted to certain groups of children-but it does indicate where contact is likely to be more complex. The most challenging cases are likely to be where children express a strong wish to remain in contact with the birth relative, but their relationship with their birth relative is very troubled. These cases need the most careful consideration, management and support.

Assessing strengths/risks: adults

Within the kinship network, do the adults involved support and promote the child's connection to BOTH families?

- Adoptive parents: adoption communication openness (CO)
- Birth relatives: acceptance of adoption
- Commitment to contact and willingness to 'work at it'

Adoptive parents "adoption communication openness" or "communicative openness" is discussed extensively in both of the UEA contact studies. This draws extensively on the work of David Brodzinsky:

Brodzinsky D (2005) 'Reconceptualizing openness in adoption: Implications for theory, research and practice', in D Brodzinsky and J Palacios (Eds) *Psychological issues in adoption: research and practice*, New York: Greenwood
Brodzinsky D (2006) 'Family structural openness and communication openness as predictors in the adjustment of adopted children', *Adoption Quarterly*, 9, pp. 1–18

It also links with ideas about "openness of attitude" as discussed by Joan Fratter, and ideas about "inclusive" as opposed to "exclusive" approaches to fostering. In the UEA studies we explored adoption communication openness in terms of five dimensions:
- empathy for the child
- empathy for the birth parent/family
- comfort with "dual connection" (i.e. the fact that the child has connections to 2 or more families)
- willingness to communicate with the child about adoption
-   willingness to communicate with the birth family

The ability of birth relatives to accept the child's membership of the adoptive family is an important factor in making contact work well. Again this has been explored

extensively in the UEA studies-most particularly in the 2007 publication below.

Neil E (2003) 'Accepting the reality of adoption: birth relative's experiences of face-to-face contact', *Adoption and Fostering,* 27(2), pp. 32-43

Neil E (2007) 'Coming to terms with the loss of a child: The feelings of birth parents and grandparents about adoption and post-adoption contact'*, Adoption Quarterly,* 10, pp. 1-23

Neil E, Cossar J, Lorgelly P and Young J (2010) *Helping Birth Families: services, cost and outcomes*, London: BAAF

Face-to-face contact was associated with higher levels of ACO and birth relative acceptance

High ACO

Positive acceptance

Direct contact
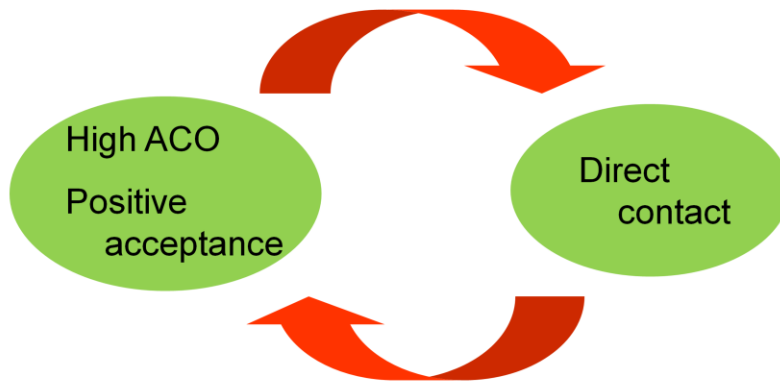
Neil, 2009: British Journal of Social Work; Neil 2007: Adoption Quarterly

This diagram shows the bidirectional relationship between the attitudes and characteristics of birth relatives and adoptive parents and the experience of having direct contact. In short, adoptive parents who are more "communicatively open" and birth relatives who are more "accepting of the adoption" are more likely to be involved in open adoption arrangements (because they agree, choose, or are allowed this option); but also the experience of having direct contact generally helps birth relatives to feel more accepting of the adoption, and helps adoptive parents to be more communicatively open.
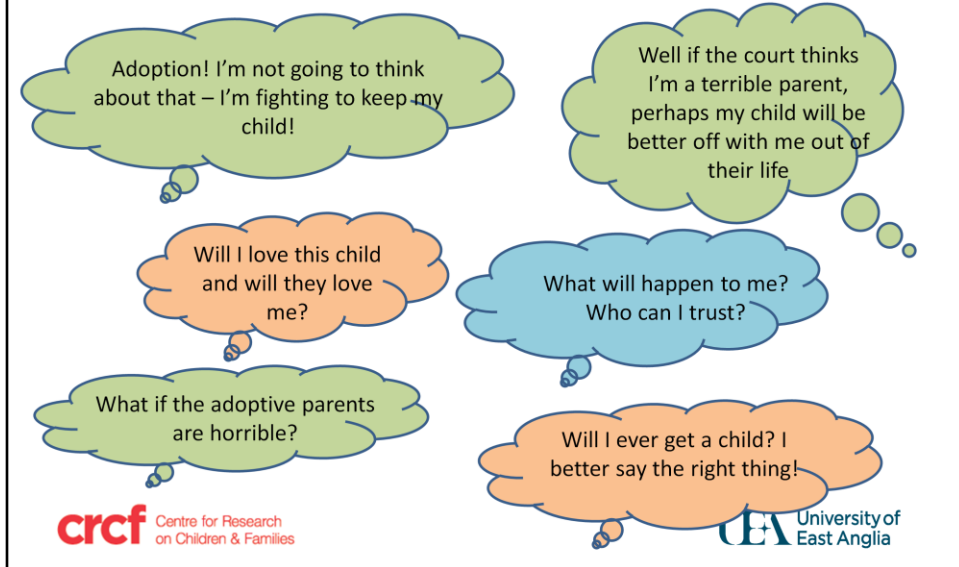
This slide illustrates the difficulty of trying to assess the strengths and vulnerabilities of all three parties during contact proceedings. The green thought bubbles represent the perspective of birth parents-who during proceedings may have high levels of anger/opposition, low self-esteem, and anxieties/jealousy about the adoptive parents. The orange bubbles are from the perspective of prospective adoptive parents-they to can be very anxious because their relationship with the child is uncertain, their own position as the child's psychological parent is often not yet established, and they can feel powerless in relation to the assessing/approving agency.

The blue bubble represents the uncertainty of the child - they may have an insecure relationship with birth relatives, they may not yet have a trusting relationship with adoptive parents, and they may be facing the loss of trusted foster carers.

The point of the slide is really to show that sometimes it is necessary to revisit these issues at some point after the adoption hearing where people may be in a better position to think about and manage postadoption contact constructively

Where contact may destabilise placements

- Cases of traumatic/abuse neglect (Howe and Steele, 2004)
- Continued lack of support for placement by birth relatives (Neil et al, 2011)
- Too high frequency – new family unable to function as 'family' (Neil, Beek and Schofield, 2003)
- Behavioural/emotional problems of child following contact put too much stress on family (Mackaskill, 2002)
- Contact perpetuates idealised view of abusive birth parents (Loxtercamp, 2009)

Contact, especially direct contact, may not be suitable for all adopted children. The publications mentioned on this slide discuss some situations where contact may be contraindicated, or where it will need to be very carefully managed.

Howe D and Steele M (2004) 'Contact in cases in which children have been traumatically abused or neglected by their birth parents', in E Neil and D Howe (Eds) *Contact in Adoption and Permanent Foster Care: Research, theory and practice*, London: BAAF
Loxterkamp L (2009) 'Contact and truth: the unfolding predicament in adoption and fostering', *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 14, pp. 423-435
Macaskill C (2002) *Safe Contact? Children in Permanent Placement and Contact with their Birth Relatives,* Lyme Regis: Russell House
Neil E, Cossar J, Jones C, Lorgelly P and Young J (2011) *Supporting Direct Contact after Adoption,* London: BAAF
Neil, E., Beek, M. and Schofield, G., 2003. Thinking about and managing contact in permanent placements: The differences and similarities between adoptive parents and foster carers. *Clinical child psychology and psychiatry*,*8*(3), pp.401-418.

This slide draws on an article from the "supporting direct contact" study - the reference and abstract are given below.

Cossar, J. and Neil, E., 2013. Making sense of siblings: connections and severances in post-adoption contact. *Child & Family Social Work*, *18*(1), pp.67-76.

Sociological and anthropological studies of kinship have examined adoption as a test case for understanding the complex combinations of biological and social ties that constitute kinship. Adoption sets up an 'adoption kinship network' between birth family and adoptive family members. Contact after adoption poses challenges for adoptive families and birth relatives in negotiating changing kinship ties. This paper examines the experience of post-adoption direct sibling contact from the perspectives of adoptive parents and birth relatives, including adult siblings. Interviews were carried out with 51 adoptive parents, four long-term foster carers and with 39 birth relatives. The analysis revealed the complex multiple family networks that exist between adoptive families and the families of the adopted child's birth siblings. These networks connect some siblings, but sever connections with others. Where direct contact occurs, infrequent meetings mean that regular, repeated interactions normally considered to constitute 'family practices' are absent, in some cases creating barriers to feelings of kinship. Implications for adoption and contact support services are discussed.

Practice model: contact in permanent placements
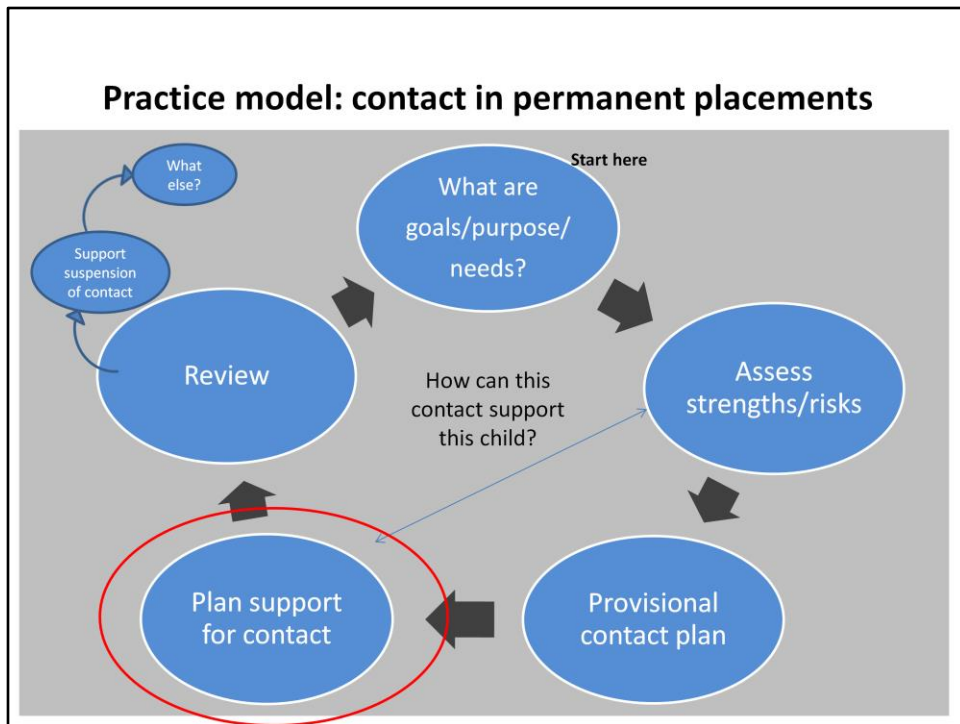
Planning support for contact should relate to the assessment of strengths and risks carried out earlier in the process.

How do social workers support contact?
(Neil et al 2011, 2015)

Good practice

- Child's needs come first, but adults needs also addressed
- Support with emotions and relationships
- Proportionate risk management

Problems in supporting contact

- Needs of one or more parties (esp. birth relatives) not addressed
- Disproportionate risk management
- Contact 'supervised' not facilitated: it may be 'safe' but not 'happy'

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A key theme from across both the UEA contact studies is that although the focus of contact must be on the child, the needs of birth relatives and adoptive parents must also be considered. Contact is not just "a letter" or "meeting" is a very emotional experience f or everyone that is part of a broader process of managing complex family issues. So when supporting contact many people may need help with expressing and processing the emotions that contact events give rise to. Some contacts may require risk management, this should be looked at on a case-by-case basis. We found many examples where contact arrangements that posed few or no risks were highly restricted or controlled. This then resulted in contact arrangements that did not feel friendly, normal or "family like". Where it is necessary for a worker to attend contact meetings, it seems to help for them to "facilitate" the meeting to try and make it not just safe but pleasant, even fun. This works better than an approach whereby the worker only intervenes to manage/prevent risk.

How does practice need to align with evidence?

- Move away from standard formula towards case sensitive planning
- Be willing to question assumptions: 'letterbox is easier than face-to-face'; 'contact can't work in non consenting cases'
- Recognise that successful contact can address difficulties often seen as contraindications (e.g. birth parents' lack of acceptance, adoptive parents anxieties)
- Question own attitudes and values: maintain an ethical climate

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These general conclusions invite a reconsideration of what we think we "know" about contact. Contact needs to be sensitive to each individual situation. The advantages and disadvantages of letterbox versus face-to-face contact need to be thought about carefully as it cannot be assumed that letterbox contact is going to be easier or work better than face-to-face in every case. Sometimes the prospect of setting up face-to-face contact may not look promising, especially in the midst of contested proceedings - but if you think this type of contact could be beneficial to the child it might be worth attempting to set up and support some limited contact in the hope that it will help both adoptive parents and birth relatives to shift to a more accepting position of each other. Finally, it's important that professionals are reflective and are willing to explore their own assumptions, attitudes and values.

For more information….

- The 'Contact after Adoption' study
https://www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption/home

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