



**MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH
BIRTH FAMILIES AFTER ADOPTION:
WHAT ARE ADOPTED ADULTS' VIEWS?**

Cassian Rawcliffe, Professor Elsbeth Neil (University of East Anglia),
Mike Hancock and Leon Elias (PAC-UK)

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MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH BIRTH FAMILIES AFTER

ADOPTION: WHAT ARE ADOPTED ADULTS' VIEWS?

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WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

The adoption of children traditionally involved severance of contact between birth and adoptive families, resulting in unresolved losses and identity problems, particularly for the adopted person. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced a requirement to consider a child's contact plans when making an adoption order, and to provide services to support contact. Whilst the intention may have been to promote more face-to-face contact, little has changed in practice and indirect contact via letters remains the norm, despite evidence from research that this form of contact is challenging and often does not last over time.

There are now widespread calls to consider a new approach to postadoption contact as highlighted in the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) report into 'The role of the social worker in adoption' (2018), the Department for Education's 'Adoption Strategy: achieving excellence everywhere' paper (2021), the 'Independent Review of Children's Social Care, Final Report' (2022) and Adoption UK's Adoption Barometer findings in 2022. In considering how best to address openness for children being adopted today it is important to learn from people with lived experience, particularly from adopted adults. It is also important to hear from adopted adults about the services they may need to cope with the lifelong impact of adoption, especially the impact of closed adoption.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The theme of National Adoption Week in 2022 is "maintaining significant relationships". This research aimed to inform this theme by gathering the experiences of adopted adults about their priorities in this area of work. This was part of PAC-UK's work

to increase the involvement of the adopted adult population, amplify their voice, and engage with them in the co-production of services.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

- An online survey was sent to 1,600 adopted adults through a PAC-UK mailing list, as well as advertised on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter. 392 adult adoptees completed the survey.
- Most (90%) of respondents were over the age of 35, with 64% over 50. There was an approximate 3:1 female/male gender split, with <1% (2) non-binary respondents, and 3% (7) preferring not to say. 79% identified as Heterosexual, 5% Gay or Lesbian, 7% Bisexual, 1% Other, and 7% preferring not to say.
- Over two-thirds (69%) were White British, 8% White Irish, 7% White other, and the remainder (16%) were of various ethnicities, including Black, Asian, Chinese, and White Gypsy or Irish Traveller.
- The survey requested open responses to the question below; analysing these qualitative comments (made by 231 respondents) is the focus of this briefing.

"This year, the theme for National Adoption Week is about maintaining relationships with birth family after adoption. What are your most important priorities around this?"

- The survey also asked respondents to tick to indicate if they were interested in the range of free services: adopted people's groups (online and in-person); adopted people's Facebook group (moderated by PAC-UK). People were also asked

whether they would be interested in therapeutic counselling (if free) and therapeutic counselling (paid for).

- Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they would be interested in being part of a PAC-UK service user steering group and/or occasional focus groups.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Wide-spread support for the prioritisation of birth-family relationships

“Separation from birth family is trauma and this growing up without biological family is an extremely difficult and abnormal experience for adoptees which is why birth family links are so important.”

Overwhelmingly respondents prioritised establishing and maintaining contact with birth family after adoption. A small number said they did not understand why it would be a priority, and two specifically warned against it.

The question asked about the *maintenance* of relationships with birth family, but for many respondents (the majority of whom had not had contact with birth relatives whilst growing up in their adoptive families) their own life experience entailed the *re-establishment* of contact prior to any relationship maintenance. Thus, understandably, prioritisation around *finding birth relatives and reunion* featured heavily within responses. Some people called specifically for intermediary support in searching and making contact. Other comments focused on the rights of a child to know their heritage. Most comments however suggested that although relationships with birth family members were wanted, adopted adults had concerns about how to establish and maintain these connections: *“How to have these relationships! How to navigate them.”*

Although many saw contact with birth relatives as necessary for the wellbeing of adopted people, a significant number of respondents expressed that a careful and cautious approach was needed. This caution was informed by two risks: the potential safeguarding risk that some birth families may

pose, and the emotional risk that might come from an unfulfilling reunion or subsequent relationship, including the threat of rejection *“a second time”*. In advising caution, respondents emphasised a need for informed choice for adoptees in which both the *“cautions, fears and pitfalls”* and *“huge joys and benefits”* are explained, and in which choices not to make contact are respected and supported.

The support for safe and meaningful contact and relationships with birth relatives is an overarching finding from this study. Additional findings sit within this theme and focus on the different aspects of adopted people’s needs regarding contact and birth family relationships.

2. Adopted people feel their needs around contact are not always prioritised

“The truth should be freely known & ultimately it is the adopted persons’ wishes that must be paramount.”

Many adopted adults felt their needs regarding birth family relationships were not always put first. People highlighted two main and overlapping areas of need: identity needs and emotional needs.

- **Identity needs:** respondents repeatedly emphasised the importance of knowing their heritage and life story prior to adoption, and how contact was an important component of achieving this. Many spoke of not knowing their heritage when growing up, and the harm they experienced because of this. For some, the loss inherent in adoption was compounded by a lack of contact and exacerbated by a lack of truth and transparency.

“Adoptees do not arrive as a blank slate. They/we have our own history and family tree no matter the circumstances of how we came to be adopted.”

“It is traumatic enough to be separated from your mother without it being shrouded in secrecy.”

- **Emotional needs:** Respondents perceived a need for support in managing the emotions related to their adoption, including the emotional demands of establishing and maintaining contact. These emotional needs included references to a sense of ‘guilt’, ‘powerlessness’, ‘lack of trust and security’, and ‘rejection’.

“Making peace with the past. Coping with loss and jealousy. Finding the joy in reunion.”

“Addressing the limbo a lot of adoptees feel when stuck between two families.”

“Managing expectations and loyalties.”

Putting the adopted persons’ needs at the centre

Responses highlighted a feeling that historically the needs of adopted people have been second to the needs of the adoptive parents. Many referred to the conflict adopted people can feel trying to balance their needs with those of their adoptive parents e.g. “Guilt of not wanting to upset adoptive parents” when making decisions around birth family contact.

“Much more needs to be done to centre the child’s needs and not the adopters’ needs.”

There was acknowledgement that all parties, including birth families, will have emotional support needs in navigating contact.

“Everyone may need therapy as this relationship can be difficult.”

3. Adopted Adults need more support

Discussion focused on three main themes: making and maintaining relationships, therapeutic support, and greater use of legislation and policy that supports contact.

Making and maintaining relationships

Requests for support in this area ranged from advice and information about how to search for and go about making contact, to intermediary support in making and managing that contact.

“Funding for search & reunion. Case study examples of good birth family contact.”

“Support with dealing with subsequent rejection and unsuccessful reunions.”

Many were specific in identifying peer advice and support, including the sharing of good and bad contact experiences, as potentially highly beneficial.

“The support of other adoptee experiences is crucial for navigating this.”

Many respondents made comments referring to improving methods of contact for currently adopted children including a wider range of options for contact being available.

“More thought needs to be given to contact which is more interactive, such as facetime over regulated channels or face-to-face meetings.”

Therapeutic support

Our survey revealed that of 372 respondents, two thirds (66%) were interested in therapeutic counselling (247). Just over half of those would only be interested if it was freely provided. This suggests that financial barriers can impede adopted adults getting the help they need. The need for therapeutic support was evident in responses referring to emotionally difficult and sometimes traumatic adoption related experiences. Some were specific in specifying the need for counselling as a component of the contact process

“It is imperative that help is on hand in the form of counsellors or experienced mentors who can provide support and advice for all those involved in the reunion process regardless of their relationship. eg siblings, cousins, parents etc on all sides of the adoption triangle.”

Others called for therapeutic counselling regarding the often unacknowledged difficulties inherent in their experiences of adoption and separation from their birth family.

“It would go a long way if there were therapeutic services available for adoptees ending the gas lighting [and trauma] that adoption (and the secrecy and shame that surrounded it) has caused.”

Use of legislation and policy

“For some children, the right to continue with some of their pre-adoption relationships needs to be protected in law.”

There was also a call for greater legislative direction of contact and the maintenance of heritage links, where it was safe to do so. Adoptees made a range of suggestions that sought to better promote contact and relationships with birth families. At one end of this range there were calls for significant legislative action including: mandated contact unless otherwise directed by the court for safeguarding reasons; laws preventing adopters from changing the name of the adoptee or hiding their birth identity; and the prioritisation of other forms of care such as guardianships, that do not include “forever severing family links”.

At the other end of this spectrum were calls for a greater professional and systemic commitment to contact, including case workers that check adopters are pursuing contact and, where they are not, that it is because of the child’s wishes. Within this there was also the acknowledgment that wishes change over time and so the possibility of contact needs to be revisited.

“Keep chasing those who say no to contact to see if any change of mind.”

4. More open discussion about birth family links is needed

“A focus on consistency, reliability and the importance of open discussion within the adopted family on this topic (neutral and supportive with the adoptee’s needs in mind).”

Adoptees emphasised the importance of more

open and honest discussion about birth family links, informed by a understanding of the reality of making and maintaining contact with birth families. People identified this need for greater openness both within the adoptive family and in the wider adoption community. Some spoke in terms of changing the adoption narrative on a wider social scale. They talked of dispelling society’s “fairy tale myths” of adoption and the idea of all birth families being “bad people”, replacing them with nuanced and more accurate depictions of adoption, the harms of not knowing your heritage, and the potential risks and benefits of maintaining contact with birth families.

Several respondents called for a greater sharing of other people’s real experiences of contact and birth family relationships, so they could make informed decisions with realistic expectations. This aligned with the requests for advice and guidance from peers. Within the wider survey significant numbers expressed readiness to engage in peer support provision (46% for online adopted people’s group, 55% in-person adopted people’s group, 38% moderated Facebook group for adopted people, n=372). Furthermore, 87% (n=319) expressed their readiness to participate in focus groups, revealing a willingness not just to receive peer generated support and information, but also to contribute to its production.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This study reveals the continuing needs and difficulties faced by adopted adults with regard to birth family contact. The findings suggest a more robust approach to contact planning is needed. This should be informed by a realistic understanding of birth family contact that considers how needs change across the life span. Such an approach requires the following elements:

- **Robust Contact Planning** at the beginning of the care and adoption journey that:
 - o Evidences how plans for safe and meaningful birth family contact across the lifespan have been considered and details the decision-making process
 - o Schedules reviews of contact planning to take account of the changing needs and circumstance of the adopted young person and their families.

- **Practical and Emotional Support** for adopted people and their families to support birth family connections. This should consider the practical, emotional, and therapeutic needs of the adopted person at different times of their life, including into adulthood. Although need for this support will vary between individuals, there are key periods where a review could be useful. For example, when teenagers start to explore their identity, or the changes in autonomy that come with adulthood.
- **Changing the Narrative of Adoption.** Participants of this study called for a more honest and informed discussion of birth family connections. This requires realistic depictions of contact, informed by the experiences and insights of adopted young people and adults, and includes the pros and cons, stresses and joys of maintaining relationships with birth relatives after adoption.

to the survey completed the question on priorities around maintaining relationships. Thus there is further selection for those who wanted and/or felt able to comment further about this topic.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The strength of this study is that it has gathered the views of 231 adopted adults for whom the issue of contact has had real consequences. They have experience on the subject and can testify to the potential trauma of these issues and the shortcomings of historical and current practice. Their informed opinions matter. Furthermore, the open design of the question, providing respondents with the space to answer however they wish, means that this data can honestly be described as their voice.

A limitation is that because the survey was sent to people on PAC-UK's mailing list, respondents may be predominantly those who have needed or are interested in receiving support with adoption-related issues. The survey may underrepresent adopted adults who are not engaged with adoption support services such as PAC-UK (some of whom may not know about their adoption). Not all respondents

HOW TO CITE THIS RESEARCH BRIEFING

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CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

Acting Director: Dr Laura L. Cook

EMAIL crcf@uea.ac.uk

WEB www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families