

## Adoption and identity: learning from the experiences of adoptees across the lifespan

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'A person's mental representation of who he or she is'

Erikson: Resolution of the psychological conflict of identity is the major personality achievement of adolescence



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## Identity as narrative/autobiography



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## McAdams: auto-biographical storytelling is related to...

- Theory of mind/perspective taking
- Memories; knowledge of 'facts'
- Opportunities to recollect and tell stories – 'scaffolding', reinterpreting,
- Listeners confirming/agreeing
- Cognitive development
- Social & cultural forces



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## Identity and self-esteem

- Strong identity commitment is associated with higher self esteem, lower levels of depression, more positive personality (Luyckx et al 2008, Meeus, 2011)
- Having a coherent narrative of adverse experiences is associated with recovery from trauma and PTSD (Adshead, 2012)



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## How does adoption obscure identity?



Adoption creates a narrative rupture in an adopted individual's life-course (Dorow, 2006)

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Where have I come from?

Who am I like?

What does it mean to be adopted?

Why was I removed from my birth parents?

What does it say about me?

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### "Telling the child" (1952)

"A child should be told of their adoption "at such an early age that he feels he has always known it... [but] it must be absolutely certain in his mind that his first mother has gone out of his life for ever... Since the only final parting a child can conceive is death, it may well be that we are justified in telling the child that his mother is dead ..."

(Kornitzer "Adoption in the modern world"  
1952)

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**In Search of Origins (John Triseliotis, 1973)**

You look in the mirror and you can't compare it with anybody. You're a stranger because you don't know what your real mother looks like...

For a long time the business of who I am has been on my mind... I feel as being only half a person, the other half being obscured by my adoption

You are one of the minority... And when people hear you are adopted they expect you to be different

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### What are adoptees curious about? (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009)

- Three quarters of 153 adopted adolescents (mean age 16) were moderately or very curious about their birth parents; number 1 question:

**Why was I adopted?**

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**What are adoptees curious about? (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009)**

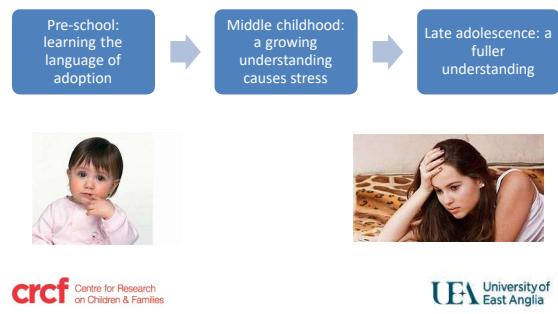
Top 5 questions:

- Reasons for placing
- Birth siblings
- Appearance/physical characteristics
- How they are doing
- Personalities/behaviour

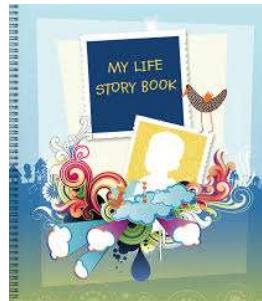
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### Brodzinsky: children's understanding of adoption develops over time



## Aiding identity: Life story books



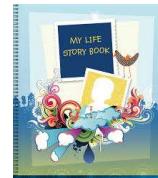
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## Aiding identity: Life story books

**Watson et al, 2015:**

- 20 YP (7-15yrs, 1 = 27 yrs)
- Often absence of a story/lack of narrative – fantasy could fill place
- Absence of multiple narratives and perspective of birth parents
- Sometimes memories of the past conflicted with lack of detail/superficial account
- A few talked of wanting to look at book without parents knowing, fear of upsetting
- Books made by APs highly rated



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## Aiding identity: Contact with birth family

- Legally contact with birth family is neither promoted nor restricted
- Contact plans often ‘cut and pasted’, with letterbox with birth parents is the norm. Levels of direct contact or contact with extended family very low
- Problems with quality of contact; adopter and professional ambivalence
- Good services to support contact not always well provided



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## Y&H survey (Neil, Young & Hartley, 2018):

- Just **under a third** (31%, 78 out of 255) of families **had not had any contact at all with birth parents**. For a further quarter (64, 25%) adoptive families **had sent letters but nothing was received in return**
- **Less than half of families (41%)** had experienced **2 way** letterbox contact, receiving at least one letter or card from birth parents, it was **not always regular or ongoing**. In many cases at least one party had stopped sending letters
- **Only 15% had experienced 2 way letterbox contact with a non parent adult birth relative**
- **Eight families had experienced some face to face contact** with an adult birth relative

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## Y&H survey (Neil, Young & Hartley 2018)

- Many parents reflected how receiving no response from birth family members without an explanation was difficult to explain to their child. Some assumed that the parents or other relatives were ‘*not bothered*’
- Some children struggled with the lack of basic information (such as what their parents look like and whether or not they have siblings). Parents spoke of children feeling angry, upset, confused, worried and rejected
- In many cases the child was not involved in the contact
- Some complained that letters were ‘inappropriate’ (e.g. ‘emotive’, ‘offensive’, ‘incoherent’)

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## A birth mother perspective

*I just can't write a letter back]. I don't know what to put in it. I don't know what words to write. What can you say to your kids that you haven't got, you know? I'm really sorry but I couldn't cope, but I love you, you know, it sounds so...it's hard...and then to tell them that you've got another child that you've managed to keep with you, that's not been taken away...*

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## A birth grandfather perspective

*Its such a secretive way of going about things...there didn't seem much point putting some stuff in if they were only going to pass on what they...they were going to censor it or edit it...[our grandson] could be thinking 'these are a bit off-hand' when we are not thinking that way at all.*

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## Y&H survey - benefits of contact for adoptive parents

- Regular letters from relatives were appreciated when they:
  - provided **information** about their child's background, how their child came to be adopted and how family members were getting on
  - provided previously **unknown details** of fathers and other relatives
  - helped the child to feel that their birth relatives were interested in them and **cared** about them

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*...the letters saying he birth mother likes bananas and the colour red give them a more rounded perspective on who she is which they wouldn't get if they only read social workers reports and police evidence.*

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## Y&H survey – factors related to positive contact

- Writing letters seemed easier when there had been a **face to face meeting** with the relatives at the time of the placement
- Empathetic attitudes of adoptive parents could help maintain/reframe tricky contact
- A small minority of parents had proactively started face to face contact

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We find it hard work and a reminder every year that he is also someone else's son, which is not very nice considering that he is ours... it's a reminder of adoption every year when you just want to get on with being a family...he is our son and he should be protected from harm

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*Contact shows our children we understand and accept them and their birth families as part of who they are...Our children need to feel that their identity with us is integrated with their birth identity - they are not separate but part of the whole. They need to know that we can accept and embrace their histories as part of who they are now. This feeds into openness to ask questions and talk about their birth family as part of processing their early experiences and coming to terms with early trauma*

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*At this age letter contact means nothing to our daughter, so direct contact would have meant a lot more to her. We want her to know as much as possible about her birth family so that it is just a normal aspect of her life and doesn't become a big romanticised question... We are pleased to get anything she might send as we think it will mean a lot to her down the line.*

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**Bee Connected  
after adoption**

Preschool      Middle childhood      Adolescence

18 year longitudinal study of adopters, adopted children/young people and birth relatives

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### Adoption in middle childhood (Neil, 2011)

Interviews - 43 domestic adoptees, age 5-12

- Children felt part of their adoptive family
- They recognised they had another family and used language to differentiate:

**"You know I've got Jane and Bella - which is still my mummy, Bella's still my mummy, but she's my tummy mummy but Jane's my real mummy"**  
(girl, age 6).

Neil, E., 2012. Making sense of adoption: Integration and differentiation from the perspective of adopted children in middle childhood. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(2), pp.409-416.

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### Children's feelings about birth family and reasons for adoption

- Children's feelings about their birth relatives varied widely (8 – negative views)

*I don't like him – he ran away from us*      *She's lovely!*

- Focus on parents being practically unable (e.g. too young, too ill, no money) or unwilling to parent, rather than neglect, abuse and compulsory removal.
- A third – BM chose not to care, 4 - the child themselves was a reason

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### Adoption & stigma

Over half of children described difficult reactions from others:

- Privacy: others would "give things away" or "spread it around".
- Difficult questions: "loads of my school friends kept asking me questions like, oh your mum is not like your real mum."
- Questions about adoption seen as "personal" or "embarrassing"
- Some children teased or bullied

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## Adoptive identity in late adolescence

- In depth interviews with 32 adopted young people, age 14-22 (mean age 18)
- Most were adopted from care (mean age 21 months)
- Most had experienced some birth family contact



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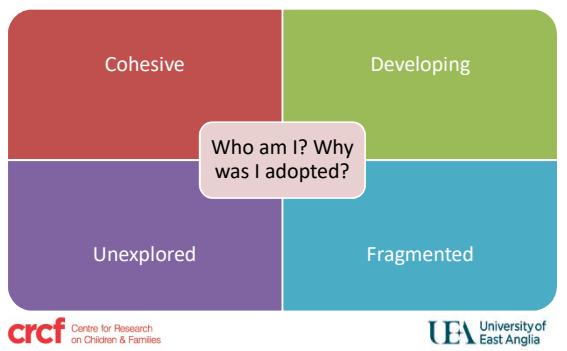
## Exploring identity in interviews

- **Depth** = ability to think about or actively engage in seeking information (**Low depth** = Story that is 'stuck', unexplored)
- **Consistency** = how well does the 'theory of self' fit together? (**Lack of consistency** = story that has contradictions, does not 'make sense')
- **Flexibility** = ability to see things as others might see them. (**Inflexibility** = rigid story, only seen from participant's perspective)
- **Feelings** ('at ease'?) How did they feel about their adoption story?

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## Neil, Beek & Ward 2015: Adoptive identity



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## Unexplored adoptive identity (n=5)

- very **simple** accounts of why they were adopted
- 'at ease'; their story made sense for them
- saw adoption entirely as a **positive** experience
- unquestioning **acceptance** of adoptive parents
- Views of birth relatives **unquestioning**

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*I just know that she couldn't look after me, that's about it. [And any idea why she couldn't look after you?] I don't know really*

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## Cohesive identity (n=16)

- **Why was I adopted?** Clear, detailed stories that had been 'worked on' and told from multiple perspectives
- **Strong identity** as member of adoptive family
- **Reflective & confident** about role of birth family
- Adoption seen as a '**better life**'/necessary
- Not tormented by information gaps. **Content**.

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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

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## Developing identity (n=5)

- **Questions about adoption not fully resolved:** *"there's got to be more to it"*
- Feelings of **wanting** and **needing** to find out more
- **Uncertain, unsettled or contradictory feelings** about the birth family
- Adoption identity **unresolved**
- Adoptive families clearly seen as "my family"

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I've actually woken up or sort of cried in my sleep and I do imagine my dad in my mind...I keep wanting to ask 'how did my dad die?' or so many things like that or 'am I able to get in contact with my birth mum?' or 'how would I go about doing that?' I do tend to ask these questions again because I just like to reminisce on those thoughts

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## Fragmented identity (n=6)

- narratives lacked coherence and were often **rigid**, '**stuck**' or 'going round in circles'
- some people **avoided exploration** of adoption
- strong presence of **negative feelings**: anger, sadness or loss – at life in general or specifically adoption
- **Ambivalent/contradictory** feelings about birth family
- being adopted a source of stigma or **emotional turbulence**

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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...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

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## Was contact linked to young people's identity development?

- More of those with 'cohesive' identity were having birth family contact (84% versus 44% of others)

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Because I didn't meet her from an early age I was just going on what I had been told really, and they weren't really good things so it was only negative feelings going round in my head...I was thinking of her in my head as this person that didn't really wasn't me anymore and was causing me injuries...then [when I met her] I knew that she did want me but because of her illness she couldn't kind of have me...she didn't give me up because she chose to, it was because she wasn't in a mentally safe place where she could cope with me

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SO I just think being adopted means to me that I have birth parents and I have relationships, which are my mum and my dad...I don't find it strange. The only people who find it strange is probably because they feel like they don't know who they are so by finding out who their family is they're going to find out who they are. But I already know who I am

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I want to know more [about my birth parents] because I don't feel I know enough...like who they were and if I have anything in common with them. To find out like who I am sort of thing

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## Was contact linked to young people's identity development?

- Levels of adoptive parent adoption communication openness ALSO higher for those in 'cohesive identity' group, and lowest in 'fragmented' group

Key role of adoptive parents in facilitating identity development through communication and contact

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## Adoption communication openness

*The creation of an open, honest, non-defensive, and emotionally attuned family dialogue...[willing] to consider the meaning of adoption in their lives, to share that meaning with others, to explore adoption related issues in the context of family life, to acknowledge and support the child's connection to two families, and perhaps to facilitate contact... (Brodzinsky, 2005)*

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Say I was in the car with my mum going shopping, it might pop into my head and I'd be like "what is it that my birth mum has?" And she'd say "schizophrenia" and I'd ask "so why couldn't she look after me?" And it would go on from there

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*Contact shows our children we understand and accept them and their birth families as part of who they are...Our children need to feel that their identity with us is integrated with their birth identity - they are not separate but part of the whole. They need to know that we can accept and embrace their histories as part of who they are now. This feeds into openness to ask questions and talk about their birth family as part of processing their early experiences and coming to terms with early trauma*

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When I ask [adopted mum] she always seems to put it off. Not to put it off but be like 'I'll go with you someday' but like that day never comes...I suppose now I'm getting older I want to know more of who I am...I just always think that like she's hiding something, well not hiding something but there's still a lot more to know that she hasn't told me. I don't ask that much I sort of accept it

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### Von Korff et al, 2010: adoptive mothers as 'identity agents'

- Used conversation to guide identity development
- Wove complex family relationships into everyday life
- Used contact to create opportunities to talk about adoption (contact seemed less important than the talk which preceded and followed them)

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### Young people's views of post adoption contact

Jon, Marcus,  
Louise and  
Carrie share  
their stories

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### What other factors might affect identity development?

- Gender
- Age
- Overall development
- Cognitive development
- Young person's level of interest/curiosity
- Young person's attitude to life
- Pre-placement history

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## Identity and wellbeing in the longitudinal sample

**Overall** - 22 'thriving', 5 'surviving', 4 struggling

- **Fragmented identity:** 4 struggling, 2 surviving
  - 3 had difficulties with life generally (e.g. serious MH issues, poor relationship with adoptive parents seemed to limit ability to cope with adoption related stress. Adoption identity not pressing concern)
  - 3 had issues related to adoption which were quite dominating; these feelings appeared central to why they were finding life difficult

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In a way I think most of my anger was because I didn't know much information about them ...I think it's because, me being angry was because of the, in a way the fear of unknowing. So I turned that fear into anger because I didn't know. That's what I think

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## Making decisions about contact (1)



- Overall development of child determined by other factors more than by contact
- **No one type of contact emerges as best option for everyone** - the balance of benefits and challenges varies from case-to-case and over time

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## Making decisions about contact (2)



- Contact with **parents** least enduring
- Indirect contact less enduring than **face-to-face**
- **One off adult meetings seen as very beneficial**
- Direct contact with **grandparents** almost always very positive

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## Making decisions about contact (3)



- **Satisfaction with contact was linked to good outcomes**
- Satisfaction with contact varied within all levels openness; it was associated with contact **quality/stability** more than type
- Dissatisfaction often associated with gaps in contact
- Contact sometimes needed to take 'a back seat' when young people were struggling

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*Adopters won't agree to face-to-face contact*

- Research findings: adopters' fears of the birth family are generally reduced by having contact; contact planning can vary widely by agency; adopters can be helped to consider many factors they initially feel wary about
- Implications: agencies (and courts?) have an important role in shaping adopters' expectations and addressing their anxieties

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## Early permanence research Coram Concurrent Planning Outcome Study follow up 2017/18

- 12 families
- All parents were strong proponents of the concurrency process. They saw the 2 main advantages to be...



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1 Being able to adopt a baby and the opportunity to promote and develop positive attachment as early as possible

2 Being able to meet and get to know their child's birth family from the beginning, enabling them to answer questions and talk to their children of their first-hand experience of meeting the birth family

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We are so glad we did that. It's incredible that we can talk to Peter about his mum with authority, [talk] about his dad, about what happened. About what happened in his first year with photographs and stories and I just don't think that there is any question at all that that **helped him to deal with who he is and how his future may be**. We completely believe in the process itself. Absolutely, 100%.

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## Contact in adoption longitudinal study - benefits of contact for adoptive parents

- Understanding/learning about birth family
- Helping them communicate with their child
- Managing anxieties: "*For me, a mother popping up out of the blue would feel very threatening...I don't have that threat because we already have that relationship with her.*"
- Bringing them closer to their child
- Emotional support

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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*

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*[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.*

*I just can't write a letter back]. I don't know what to put in it. I don't know what words to write. What can you say to your kids that you haven't got, you know? I'm really sorry but I couldn't cope, but I love you, you know, it sounds so...it's hard...and then to tell them that you've got another child that you've managed to keep with you, that's not been taken away...*

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### Where contact may destabilise placements

- 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)

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### ‘Quality’ contact

Contact experience influenced by adopter, child and birth family and case history factors:

- Communicatively open adoptive parents
- Birth relatives who are more ‘accepting’ of adoption
- Children with fewer problems, child’s wishes
- Absence of maltreatment in relationship history

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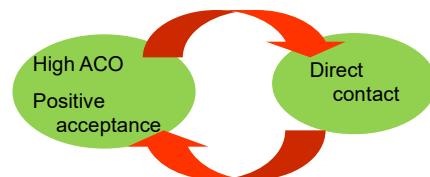
We choose venues that are a million miles away in style from the typical Social Services buildings. We're committed to creating happy, shared memories because that's what sustains relationships...the key difficulty is with his birth father because we always hold our breath in case he cancels; which he tried to do last time but we were able to approach this flexibly and with empathy towards what was going on for him at the time, and it went ahead and all was well

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### Contact as a *transactional dynamic*

...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



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

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*My husband and I met birth mum on one occasion for an hour...The face to face contact between us (no child) and birth mum was positive as it helped dispel some myths we had about her and made you realise she was just someone who made some bad mistakes in her life and was paying the ultimate price with the loss of her children...*

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*Birth mother was initially extremely aggressive and hostile but now sends good appropriate letters for letter box contact and thanked me for agreeing to do letter box contact...[she] now writes a letter to my daughter and a letter to me. I look forward to writing to her and receiving her letters...*

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## Summary

- Adoptees face additional challenges in building a sense of identity
- The meaning of adoption is highly individual, but curiosity about origins is widespread
- Making sense of adoption is a lifelong task: the story is continually told and retold
- Be flexible about contact – use case by case decision making. Think about the long term goals and aim for effective information exchange
- Support adoptive parents to use contact as a communication opportunity rather than just a meeting or letter

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## Key suggestions for practice

- Not all contact will last, and contact is not always possible; but information and contact gaps were stressful for some young people. Keeping information and archiving materials is important.
- Ensure realistic background information is available to child and adoptive parents. Help young people manage a lack of information
- Support adoptive parents to talk about difficult topics

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## Key suggestions for practice

- Recognise that people's views and actions in contested proceeding can change
- Support birth relatives to answer children's questions; help with knowing what to say in contact letters, meetings and letters for later life
- Consider involving the extended family. Grandparent face-to-face contact is often very successful. Is there scope for more children to benefit? Help grandparents to talk with child about problems of birth parents
- Keep contact plans under review

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### Online practice resources on contact <http://contact.rip.org.uk/>

The 'Contact after Adoption' study

<https://www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption/home>

Neil, E., Beek, M., and Ward, E. (2015) *Contact After Adoption: A longitudinal study of post-adoption contact arrangements*. CoramBAAF.

'Helping Birth Families' and 'Supporting Direct Contact after Adoption' studies  
<http://www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/study5.html>

Neil, E., Cossar, J., Jones, C., Lorgelly, P., & Young, J. (2011). *Supporting direct contact after adoption*. BAAF.

The Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Survey:

<https://www.uea.ac.uk/centre-research-child-family/child-placement/current-projects/the-yorkshire-humberside-regional-adoption-project-research>

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We are now recruiting for our new study into the lives of adopted people who become parents and adopters who are grandparents!

Were you adopted/adopted a child in or after 1989 in England or Wales?  
Do you want to be interviewed about your experiences?

Please contact us to find out more and consider taking part:

Email: [adopted.parents@uea.ac.uk](mailto:adopted.parents@uea.ac.uk)

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## Thank you for listening!

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