Contact in adoption

Contact in adoption is a complex issue that adoption professionals frequently negotiate. Today most adoption placements include an initial plan for contact that in many instances changes over time. By understanding contact as an issue that presents itself over the course of an adopted person's lifetime, the complexities it brings to the adoption experience can be seen. Gretchen Miller Wrobel, Harold D Grotevant, Jerica Berge, Tai Mendenhall and Ruth McRoy discuss contact from a US perspective using findings from the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Project, a longitudinal study of openness in adoption. They examine how curiosity, satisfaction with adoptive contact, family communication and searching influence decision-making about the extent of contact. Implications for adoption professionals in the USA and the UK are also presented.

Contact in adoption from a US perspective

Contact between members of an adopted child’s birth family and adoptive family is an important issue for agency personnel, social service workers, birth families, adoptive parents, and, most importantly, the adopted children themselves. Birth family contact must be considered in any adoption plan. What kind of contact is best and for whom is a question that researchers in both the United States and United Kingdom have been investigating from the perspectives of differing types of adoptive families.

In the UK, the proportion of adoptions of older children involving some form of contact has been increasing, while the number of children placed before the age of 12 months has declined sharply (Family Policy Studies Centre, 2000). In a UK sample of 168 children adopted before the age of four, the most common plan for contact was mediated letterbox contact (81 per cent), with only 17 per cent of the contact plans calling for face-to-face meetings (Neil, 2000). All children came from backgrounds that were highly complex, with birth parents who had many significant personal difficulties. Most of the children with face-to-face contact were adopted from care. In the USA, the proportion of adoptions from care has also been rising dramatically, but contact has been studied primarily in infant adoptions. The purpose of this paper is to highlight findings from the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project, the most extensive study of contact to date in the USA. Although the children were placed as infants, the study is unique because of its emphasis on the perspectives of the adopted children and adolescents, and its inclusion of views of adoptive parents, birth mothers, and agency personnel.

We first present a brief summary of the study and its methods. Then we discuss the role of the family in communication about adoption, including a model of family communication that emerged from our data. Next, we discuss several issues related to post-adoption contact: the lifespan context for contact, children’s curiosity, decisions about contact, searching, and satisfaction with adoption openness. We conclude with implications for adoption practice.

The Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project

The Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP) is a longitudinal study of ‘openness’ (contact) in adoption, examining outcomes and family dynamics of adopted children who have experienced confidential, mediated or fully disclosed adoptions. Confidential adoptions involve no contact between adoptive families and birth parents. In mediated adoptions, non-identifying information is exchanged through a third party, usually the adoption agency. Fully-disclosed adoptions are characterised by identifying and ongoing communication that is
maintained between adoptive families and
birth parents. Within the latter two groups,
contact may be time-limited (ie contact
had ceased by the time of the interview)
or ongoing (Grotevant and McRoy, 1998).
Data have been obtained from the same
sample over two time periods or waves,
with a third planned to start soon.

Wave 1: 1986–92
Adoptive families and birth mothers were
recruited for the study through 35 private
adoption agencies located in 23 different
states, from all regions of the United
States. Birth fathers were not actively
recruited to participate in the study. At
the time of placement for the children in
this study, adoption agencies did not
diligently pursue participation by birth
fathers in the placement process. Most
adoption agencies were invited to partici-
pate in the project because staff had
experience with different levels of open-
ness in their placements. Agency person-
nel were asked to develop a list of all
children who met the criteria outlined
below, and then to sample randomly
among them within levels of openness
until they located a set number of fami-
lies and birth mothers willing to be
interviewed. A small number of families
(6.3 per cent) were recruited through
advertisements in newspapers and period-
icals. Although this volunteer sample
cannot be called a fully random one,
families were specifically not recruited
on the basis of their success with adop-
tion or their having an interesting story to
tell.

Participating families included at least
one adopted child between the ages of
four and 12 years at the time of the study,
who was adopted through a private adop-
tion agency before his or her first birth-
day. Children who were adopted
transracially, internationally, or with
‘special needs’ were not included in the
sample. One child in each of the 190
adoptive families interviewed between
1987 and 1992 was designated as the
target child for purposes of the analyses.
In most families, only one child met the
sample criteria. In the families in which
more than one child qualified, selection
was either random or the child was
chosen to fill sample cells by age, gender
and level of openness. The sample in-
cluded 171 adopted target children, 90
boys and 81 girls. Nineteen children did
not participate in the study at either their
own or their parents’ request. The children
ranged in age from four to 12 years, with
a mean age of 7.8 years. Fifty-seven
children were in families with a confiden-
tial adoption, 14 children were in time-
limited mediated adoptions, 45 children
were in ongoing mediated adoptions and
55 were in fully-disclosed adoptions.

Adoptive parents were married to
the partner they had at the time of the
adoption. There were no significant differ-
ences in adoptive parents’ age, educational
levels or family income as a function of
openness in the adoption. The vast major-
ity of adoptive parents were Caucasian,
Protestant and middle- to upper-middle
class. The average level of education was
16.2 years for adoptive fathers and 15.1
years for adoptive mothers. Adoptive
fathers ranged in age from 32 to 48 years
(mean = 40.7) and adoptive mothers from
31 to 46 years (mean = 39.1). At the time
of the birth of their child, the birth
mothers’ ages ranged from 14 to 36 years
(mean = 19.1). Almost two-thirds of the
birthmothers delivered when they were
tenagers. At the time of the study, the
birth mothers’ ages ranged from 21 to 43
(mean = 27.1) and the average number of
years of education attained was 13.5.

Adoptive families were interviewed in
their homes in one session that lasted
three to four hours. The session included
separate interviews with each parent and
with the target adopted child, administra-
tion of several questionnaires, and a joint
couples interview with the adoptive
parents. Birth mothers were interviewed
in their home, at the agency or by tele-
phone; they also completed several
questionnaires. Other birth relatives were
not seen. Further detail about Wave 1
methods and results are presented in

At Wave 2, participants included the
parents and target adopted adolescent
from 177 adoptive families: 173 adoptive
mothers, 162 adoptive fathers and 156

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searching, contact in
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adoption, adopted
children and adoles-
cents, US adoptive
families
adopted adolescents (75 boys and 81 girls). Data were also collected from 88 siblings and 127 birth mothers. Most adoptive parents were still married. Five adoptive mothers and three adoptive fathers had divorced, one adoptive mother and two adoptive fathers had separated, and one adoptive father and one adoptive mother were widowed. The follow-up study occurred approximately eight years after Wave 1, so the target children were now adolescents ranging in age from 11 to 20 (mean = 15.7).

Wave 3 Plans are being made to follow the adopted adolescents and their families in the near future. By the time of the proposed follow-up the adopted children will be in young adulthood.

Variable coding In order to gain the most complete picture possible, self-report measures were complemented with ratings of data gathered through interview. The practice of combining statistical and qualitative approaches has received long-standing support (Anastasi, 1988).

Coding schemes were developed to assess several issues of interest. The variables highlighted in this paper are curiosity, desire to search and satisfaction with adoption openness. The ratings for variables were based on the entire transcript of the interview of interest. Each interview was coded independently by two coders; disagreements were resolved through discussion. Inter-rater reliability was high (.80), calculated before consensus discussion.

The role of the family in communication about adoption The perspective of adoption as a lifelong process implies that adopted children have distinct information needs at various developmental stages. The family plays an important role in facilitating communication about adoption within the system. Adoption-related communication encompasses a wide range of issues (eg telling the adoption story, relating information about birth parents, helping the child negotiate the curiosity of friends about the adoption). Typically, such communication is centred on answering the adopted child’s questions. Parents describe reacting to their child’s questioning as a purposeful decision that lets the child set the pace of communication about adoption (Wrobel et al, 1996). One adoptive mother explained:

We answered questions she had about what it meant to be adopted, that she had a birth mom. We answered the questions she had at the time [three or four years old]. Then we just built on it over the years. If she’d come back with another question, we’d give her more information.

Even though adoptive parents respond to questions from their children, they do not necessarily share all the information they have if they feel that withholding it is most appropriate for their child at that developmental stage (Wrobel et al, 1999).

Communication roles of adoptive mothers and fathers We found that adoptive mothers and fathers play different roles in communication about adoption. In general, mothers are the central information source for younger children, and fathers become more active communicators as time passes. In mediated adoptions at Wave 1, mothers in our study described themselves as the main conduit of adoption information in the family, and adoptive fathers described themselves as becoming more active in adoption-related communication when their children were more curious and had more information about their adoptions (Wrobel et al, 1998). At Wave 2, adoptive mothers with adolescents at all levels of search intensity reported being comfortable while from the perspective of the adoptive fathers, the more interest the adolescent had in searching, the more comfortable the father was with his child searching (Wrobel et al, in press). Similarly, in a group of 17 UK families, Sykes (2000) found that the role of the adoptive mothers was central in maintaining contact with the birth family. While both adoptive mothers and adoptive fathers increased their comfort with contact over time,
adoptive mothers described a higher level of commitment to contact at placement than adoptive fathers. This pattern is not unusual given that children often talk more with their mothers about personal concerns (Youniss and Smollar, 1985).

The Family Adoption Communication Model (FAC)
Adopted children and adolescents have distinct information needs at various developmental stages, and adoptive parents must decide how to respond to their children’s curiosity in an age-appropriate manner. Family communication about adoption is an important task for adoptive families and can be conceptualised as occurring in a series of stages. The Family Adoption Communication Model (FAC), developed from our first wave of data collection (Wrobel et al., 1999), describes communication pathways through which adoptive families progress, using a developmental ecosystemic approach. FAC depicts changes in communication that occur in adoptive families and describes the people and events that often serve as catalysts for change both within and outside of the adoptive family system. FAC includes the role of openness as a factor affecting adoptive family communication and moves our understanding beyond models that were developed when confidential adoptions were the norm (Kirk, 1964).

The first stage reflects the early years in the life cycle of the family. During this stage, parents provide unsolicited information and meet their children’s information needs. It is here that the adoption story is told. The adoptive parents are in control and decisions are made about what is included in the narrative. As new information becomes available, adoptive parents decide what will be shared and how the information will be communicated.

During the second stage, the child’s ability to form questions about his or her own adoption grows. Adoptive parents are still in control of information given to their child and must make decisions about the amount and type of information they will provide and whether they will seek information they do not possess in order to address their children’s questions. Yet the child influences the timing of the discussion. Each new developmental stage of the child may bring new questions for the adoptive parents. For example, when understanding that adoption is based upon legal relinquishment of parental rights, the child may want to know more about the placement process. Adolescents’ sexual maturation may prompt questions related to the circumstances of their own conception.

The hallmark of the third stage of the FAC model is the ability of the young person to obtain new information independently. In this stage the adopted child or adolescent has direct access to information. It is this stage that especially differentiates the variety of adoption situations. Children who were adopted at older ages have memories of contact with their birth parents and may possess knowledge about how to contact them directly. Sykes (2000) noted that the more adoptive parents’ confidence is promoted, the more comfortable the parents are with contact. This comfort appears to increase across the early years of the adoption as parents control the boundary between the adoptive and birth family. For many adopted adolescents in confidential adoptions, the age of majority allows them to seek information on their own. For younger children in fully disclosed adoptions, visits, phone calls or letters from the birth parents may be a regular occurrence. Yet for every type of adoption, adoptive parents can choose to facilitate or block information-gathering. The possible combination of parental help and direct searching or contact by the adopted child highlights the dynamic nature of the model. While the stages are consecutive, the adopted child can move back and forth between them with movement stopping or pausing at any point.

Contact in adoption
Most US adoption agencies have responded to societal pressure for more openness in adoption by incorporating contact into their adoption practice (Henney et al., 1998). Infant adoptions and adoptions without some form of contact are no longer the norm. Beyond these generali-
sations, however, there are still many questions about how much contact is desirable, between whom and at what stages of life. Individual circumstances including current level of contact, adoptive and birth family dynamics, and the desires of the adopted child or adolescent all play a role in determining how contact could play out throughout the adopted person’s life.

Adoptive relationships must be understood in a lifespan context (Schechter and Bertocci, 1990; Brodzinsky, Lang and Smith, 1995; Grotevant and McRoy, 1998; Logan, 1999; Selman 1999; Howe and Feast, 2000). Desire for information may intensify at some points and be less central at others. The ability of birth parents or other birth family members to provide information at the times it is requested may not be in tune with the timing of the request. We found there to be a differing need for information between the birth mothers, adoptive parents and adopted children. In the early months after placement the birth mothers expressed a high need to know that the children they had placed for adoption were safe and doing well. Adoptive parents at this time viewed communication with the birth mothers as less central to their experience because they were focused on the formation of their new family. As the adopted children grew and requested more information, birth mothers were sometimes less able to meet the request because of a marriage, career demands or parenting of subsequent children (Grotevant and McRoy, 1998). It is important to recognise that an asynchrony of need for communication between birth and adoptive families can exist so that a lack of response may not be interpreted as a rejection of the request but an inability to respond at the specific time of the request. One birth mother described wanting less contact than the adoptive parents who were trying to respond to their child’s questions and the tension that the situation created:

They [adoptive parents] want me to be more involved than I am but I just don’t have the time to devote to her [adopted child] because there is so much going on in my own life.

Understanding that a differing need for communication can exist may help all involved to interpret requests and responses in a broader context. One of the most important constructs to emerge from our data is collaboration, the notion that the adoptive family and birth family members work together over the course of the child’s life on behalf of the child’s well-being. This involves empathy for each other’s views and needs, willingness to listen and compromise, and commitment to nurturing their mutual relationships for the child’s benefit. When the adults in the adoptive kinship network can demonstrate collaboration in their relationships with one another, this understanding of differing needs can be used to interpret the multiple perspectives that can exist so that relationships can be maintained for the adopted child’s well-being. A slow response to a request for contact for information may not necessarily reflect a lack of desire to communicate but the complex situation in which the responders may find themselves at that particular time. An empathic interpretation can facilitate collaboration that in turn can be a protective factor in the development of the child (Grotevant et al, 1999).

Collaboration between adoptive parents and birth relatives can also affect the amount of contact in the adoption arrangement. Neil (2002) interviewed the adoptive parents and birth relatives of 36 children who had face-to-face contact with either their birth mother or birth grandmother. All of these children were placed before the age of four. The interviews took place approximately two-and-a-half years into the adoption. At that time 42 per cent of the contact plans had altered, with about half increasing in openness or frequency and half decreasing. When families could work out a contact plan that allowed them to move to an arrangement that matched their particular circumstances, contact was generally viewed favourably.
Curiosity
Curiosity about the world is a hallmark of childhood and adolescence. It should not be surprising that most adopted children express curiosity about their own adoptions. The children interviewed during Wave 1 of our study were consistently curious about their adoptions, regardless of their openness levels. Satisfaction with adoptive openness did not reduce their curiosity, although, in general, girls expressed more curiosity than boys and older children were more curious than younger ones (Wrobel et al., 1996).

Curiosity was related to searching behaviour at Wave 2 (Wrobel, Grotevant and McRoy, in press). Adolescents who had no interest in searching expressed the lowest levels of curiosity. Those who were positive they would search in the future had the highest levels of curiosity. Adolescents who had actively searched indicated levels of curiosity higher than those who had no interest in searching but lower than those who intended to search. Interestingly, those with the greatest curiosity also expressed most dissatisfaction with the amount of openness in their adoption. The combination of these factors may have helped the adolescents to focus on their goal of getting more information. With a mean age of 15.4 years, this group was not old enough to search independently, possibly contributing to their dissatisfaction with adoptive openness.

The consistency of curiosity across time demonstrated by the children and adolescents in our study supports the idea that adoption is a lifelong process. After being asked if she would like to talk with her birth parents one adolescent replied:

It's basic curiosity you know; wanting to know what they are like and wanting them to tell me why they gave me up for adoption, that sort of stuff. Just curiosity; basic curiosity. I think that explains it.

It should be expected that all adopted children, regardless of their individual situations, demonstrate curiosity about their adoptions during several different developmental periods.

Making decisions about contact
Curiosity about one's adoption ebbs and flows but does not disappear across childhood and adolescence. Even children adopted at older ages who know or remember their birth families may demonstrate curiosity. Curiosity coupled with a desire for contact in adoption has come to be interpreted as normative (Wrobel et al., in press). Yet the presence of curiosity does not necessarily result in active searching for more information. For many adopted persons who have no contact with their birth families, the question is whether contact should occur at all. After some consideration, one adolescent in our study decided that she did not want to talk with her birth parents:

I did [want to meet birth parents] for a little while but I thought about it for a little bit, then decided again I didn’t really want to any more. You know, it’s just something that isn’t really important in my life that much.

Another adolescent talked of how it would feel awkward to meet his birth parents because he couldn’t see what they would have to offer:

Other than the fact it would make sense to find out some medical history, I’m not in a big hurry [to meet birth parents]. It would be kind of weird and I don’t know what they could offer me other than just being new people to meet and that’s how I would consider it, just new people to meet.

At the same time it is important to recognise that many adopted people do want to search and that the decision to search does not necessarily stem from poor adoptive family relationships (Wrobel et al., in press) but a desire to explore identity, genealogy, or fill in gaps in their own adoption story (Howe and Feast, 2000).

Decisions about contact do not end at placement; negotiating contact is a lifelong issue. Traditionally, searching has been studied from the perspective of the adult searcher. Howe and Feast (2000), by studying both adult searchers and non-searchers, have increased our understand-
ing of the search process. They found that searching did not depend on the type or quality of available information or how the telling of information was handled by adoptive parents, but the adopted person’s reaction ‘to perceived deficits’ of information or experience (p 161). Non-searchers as a group were more satisfied with the amount of information they had received, yet both searchers and non-searchers thought about birth relatives while growing up.

Our data provide some insight to the saliency of this issue for adolescents. All of the adolescents who did not already have ongoing contact were able to tell us what they thought about searching and their desires related to contact (Wrobel et al, in press). Both of these studies demonstrate that the issues of searching and desires related to contact are important ones towards which much thought is directed regardless of whether the person decides to search or not. It is this thought process that is a common, normative experience for adopted people. At the same time, there are societal expectations that all adoptees want to increase the amount of information or contact they have (Roche and Perlesz, 2000). The adopted people who are satisfied with their amount of contact, at whatever level it exists, indicate that these societal expectations do not hold for everyone.

Legal issues also bear on how individual decisions about contact are made. At the macro level, government policies and legislation influence the accessibility of information. In contrast to legislation enacted in the UK, the USA has no national policy or law related to the adoption process or access to adoption records. Each of the 50 states sets its own policies. Unlike the Children Act 1989, the Adoption Act 1976 and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 that define a role for child participation in the UK (Freeman, 1998/99; Family Policy Studies Centre, 2000), laws adopted by individual states in the USA have had the protection of privacy as their focus.

Legal access to records is quite varied in the USA. Each individual state has specific requirements regarding age of majority (ranging from 18 to 21) and extent of access granted at attainment of majority. If the one seeking more information has not attained the age of majority, they must have the consent of their adoptive parents to initiate a search. Each state also has its own set of regulations concerning adoption procedures. Adoptees seeking information often find that understanding the relevant legal systems can be a daunting task, if not a deterrent.

Searching
In addition to satisfaction and curiosity, searching is influenced by age and openness. To further investigate how openness can influence search behaviour 93 adolescents, representing the full continuum of openness, were rated on the intensity with which they reported a desire to search (Wrobel et al, in press). Adolescents in fully disclosed adoptions who already knew their birth mother and had ongoing contact were excluded from the sample. Searching included locating birth parents or obtaining additional information. The continuum of searching behaviour rated from the adolescent interviews included four categories:

1. no or weak interest in searching;
2. moderate interest in searching;
3. strong interest;
4. embarked on a search.

The mean age of the adolescents in our study who were engaged in an active search was 18.7 years, approximately three years older than the mean age for each of the other categories. Attaining the age of majority (between 19 to 21 years of age in the USA) appears to ease the ability to take concrete action towards searching. While age does not prohibit active searching (adoptive parents can give permission to search), it can be a barrier. Gathering more information or searching for birth parents is often postponed until the information can be sought independently. One adolescent who wanted to meet her birth parents felt unable to do so:

*It doesn’t really matter whether I do or not [want to meet birth parent]. I*
definitely want to meet them. I'm not allowed to until I'm 18.

In addition, older adolescents have the ability to understand and negotiate the complex relationships and legal regulations related to gathering more information. Howe and Feast (2000) found that searching is sometimes postponed in order not to hurt adoptive parents. As one adolescent from our study stated:

When I'm 18 perhaps, out of college maybe, I will go down to the adoption agency and see if they found anything, if my birth parents wanted to speak to me. If so I'd like to meet them. But again, not in front of my adoptive parents because that might cause problems.

The level of openness is directly related to the amount of information adolescents have about their birth history and birth family, and openness did influence search intentions. Those adolescents with more information about their birth parents were more likely to have strong intentions to search or to have actively searched. Where-as adolescents in confidential adoptions were not actively searching, 42.9 per cent of those in open adoptions were in the active search group (Wrobel et al., in press). It may be that having some information gives hope that more could be forthcoming after a search, especially if the child's parents or birth parents communicated that they provided the information because they felt it was in the child's best interest.

Adolescents with mediated adoptions (for example, those with non-identifying post-only contact) were particularly interesting. Intention to search among adolescents with mediated adoptions was the most evenly spread across the four search categories (Wrobel et al., in press). Mediated adoptions provide information through an agency intermediary. Thus adoptees may infer some ambivalence about contact on the part of the birth family and be less sure that requests for information will be positively received.

Satisfaction with contact
We have found that satisfaction with the amount of openness in adoptive relation-

ships is related to contact and age. At Wave 1, younger children (4 to 7 years) were more satisfied with their current level of adoptive openness than the older children (8 to 12 years), based on our ratings of their interviews. The amount of openness in the relationship was unrelated to satisfaction (Wrobel et al., 1996). At Wave 2, the relationship between contact and satisfaction became more complex. For the 145 adolescents who were interviewed during the second wave of our study, contact was defined as either occurring (59 per cent of the adolescents had contact with birth mothers, 15 per cent with birth fathers) or not occurring. It is important to note that these percentages were self-reported by the adopted adolescent. Contact included any combination of letters, phone calls or face-to-face meetings and could be non-identifying or identifying. On average, adolescents who had contact were more satisfied with the openness in their adoptive relationships than those who did not have contact. This pattern was true for contact with both birth mothers and birth fathers (Mendenhall et al., in press). It should be noted that those without contact were not dissatisfied but rated their satisfaction in the neutral range.

Given the neutrality of the mean satisfaction ratings in the no contact group, it could not be assumed that all adolescents in that group desired contact. We again used our rating of search intent to investigate the relationship between satisfaction with contact and search behaviour. Satisfaction did appear to be related to searching for this group of adolescents. Among the first three groups that had not yet engaged in concrete action related to searching, the greatest satisfaction with level of openness was reported by those adolescents who had no or only a weak intention to search. Adolescents who reported a strong desire to search reported the lowest levels of satisfaction. Satisfaction rose for adolescents who had engaged in concrete searching actions, with males reporting the highest level of satisfaction among all groups and females reporting satisfaction second only to those who did not intend to search. When satisfaction is viewed through the lens of
searching, greater complexity can be seen; namely that not all adolescents want more openness and that some adolescents in confidential adoptions are satisfied with minimal amounts of information available to them.

**Conclusion**

Although many adopted adolescents wish to have more openness in their adoptions, not all do, highlighting the need to take individual desires into account when negotiating amount of contact. The desire for more or less openness or contact can change across time. It is important to listen to the wishes of the adopted child or adolescent when deciding upon a course of contact. One adolescent put it this way:

*You know it kind of has to be the child’s decision. I think that because the child may not want to meet them [birth parents], the child may think ‘you gave me up, you didn’t want to meet me and why should I want to see you?’ That’s why I really think it should be the child’s decision.*

Taking into account the child’s position is especially important for those who do not desire a change and are happy with what some may consider a lesser amount of openness. Contact is an individual choice and should not be dictated by adoption professionals or family members without consideration of the desires of the adopted child or adolescent. Adoption professionals, adoptive families and adopted persons must be ready to acknowledge that adoption plays a role in individual lives without assuming that all initial contact plans will change over time. For families involved in some form of contact, parties should consider at different points whether their current situation is satisfactory or if more contact is desired. Adopted people who do not desire contact still make decisions about contact. At times, a desire to remain in a confidential adoption can run against societal expectations and adoption professionals can support those who have made such a decision. Adoption professionals should be ready to provide post-placement services that recognise that adoption issues can bring decisions about contact to the forefront at different periods in a person’s life.

1. Adoption plays a role in development across the lifespan, from the first telling of the adoption story, to a full understanding of the meaning of adoption, to adoptive identity formation. The amount of contact in an adoption sets differing paths upon which an adopted person’s growth occurs and it can be assumed that many initial contact plans will change over time. For families involved in some form of contact, parties should consider at different points whether their current situation is satisfactory or if more contact is desired. Adopted people who do not desire contact still make decisions about contact. At times, a desire to remain in a confidential adoption can run against societal expectations and adoption professionals can support those who have made such a decision. Adoption professionals should be ready to provide post-placement services that recognise that adoption issues can bring decisions about contact to the forefront at different periods in a person’s life.

2. Contact in adoption can work in infant and older child placements. Studies from both the USA and the UK indicate that contact is a dynamic practice that requires the attention of all members of the adoptive kinship network. When adoptive parents, birth parents and adopted children work together, contact can be managed so that the needs of the adopted child can be met while maintaining positive relationships among all members of the adoptive kinship network. Adoption professionals can help individuals in the adoptive kinship network understand that their ability to positively collaborate with one another across time benefits the adopted child. This is especially true when contact is occurring in the context of difficult and complex circumstances for the birth mother and birth family.

3. Contact is a complex issue and should not be perceived as a panacea that eliminates the additional, normative life tasks adoption brings. For example, while contact in adoption can answer questions an adopted person might have about his or her adoption history and birth family, it does not eliminate the need to incorporate adoption into one’s identity.
4. Contact in adoption brings additional relationships to manage. Deciding how much contact to have and how often requires the consideration of all parties involved: the adoptive parent, siblings, birth parents, birth relatives and the adopted child. Since many contact arrangements do change over time, adoption professionals should be ready to support the families and individuals involved in negotiating these relationships, especially when the adoptive family’s and birth family’s needs for contact differ.

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