In adoption, children experience the loss of significant attachment relationships, based on the internal working models of their parents which were formed from birth and, rooted in memories, strongly affect them throughout childhood. Ann Courtney maintains that before children can move on to the next stage of mourning their losses, those original models have to be made explicit. She considers how this can be achieved by ‘incorporating’ the birth parent in some way into the daily life and relationships of the child. The likely effect of contact is discussed, as is the role of the adoptive parent and possible therapeutic intervention.

**Introduction**

Adoption is a fundamental, permanent and legal change in the life of a child. It is intended to provide a child with new attachment figures, and a safe base for childhood and throughout life. Adjustment to the losses involved in adoption is a major developmental task. In recent years, adoption practice and the experience of adoption for children have changed dramatically. With children being placed at a later age and with increasing openness and contact, much attention has been paid to providing children with information and explanations to assist them in understanding the reasons for their adoption, and with a sense of identity. This is clearly of crucial importance. However, less attention has been paid to the child’s sense of loss and the task of grieving this loss, although loss is seen as an integral part of the adoption experience for all parties. Indeed a recent review of research (Department of Health, 1999) states:

*A recurring theme in the children’s comments was the sense of loss at having to leave their birth families and, in certain cases, others (such as foster carers) to whom they had become attached.* (p 45)

This article describes a way of considering an adopted child’s experience of loss from a theoretical perspective, and explores how a child might be helped with this experience. In particular, I will consider how the current debate about ongoing contact – whether through a letterbox system or face-to-face – needs to be considered from within a theoretical framework.

This framework takes an essentially Eurocentric view of loss and grief. In other cultures loss and bereavement are treated differently, and culturally determined practices strongly influence the experience of bereavement. These include rituals which may involve contact with the dead person, reverence for the deceased, and the part ancestors play in a family’s life and culture. Similarly, other losses are likely to be affected by, for example, the meaning and accessibility of divorce and adoption in particular societies. Although of considerable interest, these experiences are beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, I have not included the losses experienced by transracially adopted children, who may lose contact with members of their culture and ethnic group. Both these areas would benefit from further study in separate articles.

‘Loss’ is defined as the affectual state that an individual experiences when something of significance is withdrawn; separation whether temporary or permanent from meaningful relationships precipitates an acute sense of loss; and ‘grief’ is the process through which one passes in order to deal with a loss (Fahlberg, 1994). Palombo (1981) defines ‘grief’ as the psychic pain attendant upon the work of mourning, which is the set of internal adaptations a person makes after the loss of a significant person. Writers agree that for grief to be experienced there must be some form of attachment to the person who has been ‘lost’.

I suggest firstly, that in order to...
‘mourn’, a child will need to have an internal working model of their birth parent. This model will be based on memories of attachment figures, factual information provided by others (e.g. story work) and fantasy. Secondly, the child needs to go through a process of mourning this relationship which involves not ‘moving on’, but integrating this model into her or his everyday life, by an ongoing process of renegotiating the relationship. Finally, it will be suggested that contact has an impact on both these processes, and that adoptive parents need to be actively involved, although there may also be a need for therapeutic intervention.

Memory and internal working models
Crittenden (1992a) has developed a model in which she integrates Tulving’s work on memory systems and Bowlby’s concept of internal working models, within a child development framework.

Bowlby (1988) proposed the concept of internal working models of attachment figures, which are developed by children from their early experiences, to help them make sense of the world. These models are initially based on current relationships with attachment figures, but once formed influence new interactions and are only changed slowly. Internal working models involve a complementary relationship between the child and attachment figure and, taken together, represent the whole relationship. If the caregiver is responsive, the child develops a model of her- or himself as valued and the attachment figure as reliable.

Crittenden (1990, 1992a) suggests that the models include factual knowledge about a relationship and affective knowledge – that is, the feelings associated with the relationship. She outlines the relationship between these models and memory systems. Tulving (1985) postulates that there are three different memory systems – procedural, semantic and episodic – and that each system holds information of a different type, that is ‘behaviour sequences’, ‘verbal generalisations’ and ‘events’ respectively. Internal models summarise information in each memory system. Crittenden (1992a) argues that, although in the past attachment theorists have focused almost exclusively on semantic and episodic memory systems:

including procedural memory in the discussion of models of attachment relationships permits a more complete understanding of attachment behaviour, particularly in infancy (p 577).

Procedural memory
Procedural memory initially encodes information about recurrent patterns of sensory stimuli and behavioural responses. These create the internal working model of the attachment figure and the self that can be maintained throughout life and are initially created in the sensorimotor stage.

Thus the internal working model’s basis is procedural memory, which is preconscious and reflective of the baby’s actual experience, even though the actual experiences are not ‘remembered’ at a cognitive level. These procedural memories will continue to have an influence on behaviour, even after the development of later memory systems which are conscious and available to recall.

Evidence of the earliest impact of actual experience is supported by the work of Stern (1985). Using an extensive review of developmental research, he argues that babies function independently from birth, developing an increasingly complex ‘domain of self-experience and social relatedness’ (p 9). This is a mutual process as the baby’s sense of self develops and the mother, or other main carer, helps the infant affectively integrate these experiences through the process of ‘affect attunement’, responding empathically to her infant. Thus experiences, including attachment experiences, begin to be organised into meaningful patterns from infancy.

In a recent review of attachment research, Field (1996) argues convincingly that there is a physiological basis, based on studies of primates as well as human infants, for attachment from birth. She cites evidence of behavioural and physiological disorganisation, and altered
cellular immune responses in monkeys when separated from their mothers, which she maintains are similar to behaviours and physiological changes in children.

**Semantic memories**

Semantic memories begin to encode verbal representations of experience as children move into what Piaget termed the ‘pre-operational stage’, when they are able to ‘think’ beyond their immediate experiences. Relating this to internal working models, Crittenden (1992a) wrote:

> Semantic models of verbally encoded information consist of linked generalisations regarding the self and attachment figure. Like words, these models may be presumed to be first constructed from the generalisations offered by others . . . such early semantic models represent reality from the caregivers’ perspective. (p 577)

Thus, for example, early memories of being described as ‘bad’ or ‘troublesome’ may continue to have an impact, even when a child is provided with a new description of themselves as ‘good’ or ‘lovable’. Crittenden argues that semantic memory is available to assist the organisation of behaviour when procedural models fail to achieve their expected ends, and there is low to moderate affect.

**Episodic memory**

Episodic memory consists of episodes of experience encoded by multiple means, including verbal, auditory and visual. These are often recalled as sequentially ordered episodes, with characters, movement, sounds, smells and the associated feelings. When experiences of pre-operational children are recalled, they will re-experience the event affectively or with sensual evocations. Pre-operational children’s understanding of events mean their memories may be confused. Discussion of events can create or change memories; stories, wishes or dreams can be encoded as memories; verbally framing an event can result in it being recorded as episodic memory. Crittenden argues that events stored episodically tend to be those that are emotionally arousing, and therefore likely to be traumatic or distressing. Again, these memories are activated when procedural memories fail to achieve the expected outcome, and when there is a high level of affective resonance with the current situation, for example the recall of a distressing or traumatic event in ‘flashbacks’.

It is important to note that there may be inconsistencies between episodic memories, which are episodes of experience, and semantic memories which the child develops in response to statements by the carer (see, for example, Bowlby, 1979). Therefore, it is possible for information in the different memory systems to be consistent or inconsistent. Discrepancies may be noticed, evaluated and resolved, with the help of a sensitive carer, or they may be distorted or denied. Crittenden (1992a) states:

> Parents may validate children’s unique perspective; such parents foster their children’s belief in the soundness of their own minds, their efforts to discern meaning in experience, and their awareness of divergent perspectives. On the other hand, parents who ‘correct’ children’s memories, particularly those who are threatened by their child’s perspective, may undermine their child’s confidence in their own perceptions and the adequacy of their mental functioning. (pp 578–79)

This is clearly an important point in adoption and a particularly difficult task for adoptive parents who do not share a child’s memories, and often have limited or inaccurate information.

There is much recent research literature which has supported the validity of the concept of memory-based internal working models experimentally, by using story-stem techniques. This involves asking children to complete stories, specifically designed to elicit different responses to a variety of attachment-related issues, usually using small family figures. This research is illustrated in work by Cassidy (1988), Bretherton et al (1990), Crittenden, (1992a) and also Toth et al (1997), who suggest that some
reliable information on early procedural memories can be gained by using play and storytelling techniques. These studies have developed a system for classifying story completions by children which are indicative of secure or insecure attachments.

Working with children in experimental situations has also confirmed Bowlby’s contention that the models – of the attachment figure and themselves – are resistant to change, and the children tend to assimilate new information to their original model rather than accommodate, or adapt, to new experience. Thus children’s perceived experience can be limited to that which fits existing models. Very significantly for this discussion, it would appear that abused children’s models are particularly resistant to change (Toth et al., 1997).

Thus all children will develop models of attachment relationships, based on their memory systems, from birth, which will affect their future attachments and their adaptation to future events.

Bereavement
The second area of research that can offer insight into children’s experience of loss in adoption are studies of children who have been bereaved.

Research by Silverman and Nickman (1996) with a non-clinical sample of bereaved children has developed the idea that children have a need for an ongoing relationship with their ‘lost’ parent. They found that children seemed to be maintaining relationships to their dead parents rather than letting go:

This did not seem to be connected to their yearning for the deceased or wishing that he or she would return. Instead we found that children had sets of memories, feelings, and behaviours that, as they saw it, brought them closer to their deceased parents. We called these activities ‘constructing’ the deceased. This inner representation or construction led the children to remain in relationship with the deceased . . . this relationship seemed to change as the children matured and as the intensity of their grief lessened. (p 73)

Thus the grieving process did not involve a ‘recovery’ or ‘resolution’ but rather a process of adaptation and change, which involved renegotiating the meaning of the loss, as the child developed and life circumstances changed.

Although the deceased person cannot change or develop, a child’s ability to make sense of information about the deceased does alter, with their increasing cognitive abilities.

Silverman and Nickman (1996) identified five types of activities that seemed to lead to children maintaining a connection to the deceased parent.

1. locating the deceased (often in Heaven) – an important cognitive activity and a prerequisite to the development of an ongoing relationship;
2. experiencing the deceased, eg believing the parents were watching them, telling them off – this can be positive or negative and will depend on the previous relationship with the deceased;
3. reaching out to the deceased, taking some initiative to keep in touch, visiting a grave, speaking to the deceased;
4. waking memories, described as an intensification, fortification, or other modification of pre-existing memories, rendering them more accessible to consciousness;
5. linking objects – having an object belonging to the deceased was an important means of maintaining a link (cf. Winnicott’s transitional object).

They also found that it was very important that the process of constructing a connection with the deceased was part of an ongoing dialogue with other family members and that the ambivalence of other family members can render them unhelpful to a child. Thus there is no closure, although the child becomes more oriented to the future and less to the past. Accommodation may be a more suitable term than closure. Pynoos (1992) makes a similar point, saying:

As they complete a number of important developmental steps, children continue
over the years after the death to renegotiate in their minds their relationship with the deceased . . . They will conjecture how their parent would feel about this action, eg be proud, or unhappy about their choice. (p 5)

This material would suggest that maintaining an internal working model, based on a child’s memories of their parent, is of great importance in an adaptive grieving process and also suggests ways that an adopted child’s experience might be conceptualised. However, although these imply that the prior relationship has an impact on the response to loss, their data has so far not systematically tested the link between the child’s attachment to their dead parent and their reaction to the loss.

Adoption and loss: ‘covert’ and ‘overt’ losses

It is proposed that these two areas of research can assist in an understanding of the experience of the adopted child and in informing practice.

A distinction has been made (Nickman, 1985) between two types of loss in adoption: a covert loss, associated with early adoption, when a child is said to have no attachment (or perhaps just no semantic memories of their birth parents); and an overt loss, which is more akin to death and divorce, when the child has an attachment to the birth parent. This distinction has also been used by Brodzinsky (1984, 1990) who states that there is no sense of loss in a baby placement, where primary attachments are with adoptive parents until there is an understanding of adoption, at about the age of 8–11 years, at which point the child may go through a stage of ‘adaptive grieving’.

I suggest that it is helpful to conceptualise loss in adoption by considering the two ‘tasks’ separately (although a child will not separate the tasks so neatly in experience). Thus an adopted child may be said to need to: a) bring into awareness or maintain in awareness a reasonably coherent internal working model of their birth parent(s) and then b) mourn the loss, by renegotiating the relationship, rather than ‘letting go’.

Fantasy plays an important part in the creation of the inner representation, and the use of fantasy is likely to be related to the amount of information available. Nickman (1996) comments that when there is no contact, fantasy serves an adaptive purpose, but this can be defeated by the failure of adoptive parents to recognise its importance. He argues that adoptive parents should have strategies

Internal working models in a ‘covert loss’

It has been argued that a child needs an internal working model of his or her parent before he or she can grieve a loss. However, babies do not need understanding or awareness to experience a feeling. Without the cognitive abilities to process a representation of the mother, her loss in infancy is experienced as an affect, based on procedural memories. Thus for most adoptees in ‘covert adoptions’ there will be some procedural memory which will form the basis for an internal working model, although it may not be possible to bring this into awareness.

Nickman (1996) develops this theme, in a discussion based on clinical work with approximately 250 adoptees, over a number of years. Using the same paradigm as Silverman and Nickman (1996) outlined above, he sees adoptees as needing to maintain a relationship with their lost parent(s), in the same way as a bereaved child does. However, in a covert loss, the parent has first to be ‘created’.

He argues that for the child adopted as a baby:

... a mental construction of the absent progenitors becomes necessary, and that the internal dialogue between an adoptee and his or her inner representation or construction of the birth parents is as much a relationship as between a bereaved individual and the dead person. The formal characteristics of the connection are similar: in both cases a person has powerful emotions and detailed thoughts about an individual who is not present; this complex of thought and emotion can operate on both a conscious and an unconscious level to influence choices, affect and behaviour. (p 257)

Fantasy plays an important part in the creation of the inner representation, and the use of fantasy is likely to be related to the amount of information available. Nickman (1996) comments that when there is no contact, fantasy serves an adaptive purpose, but this can be defeated by the failure of adoptive parents to recognise its importance. He argues that adoptive parents should have strategies
for assisting their child to form an inner representation of birth parents that is consistent with the child’s well-being. Although Nickman speaks of creating a model, evidence cited earlier in this article suggests that the model will also be based on some memory information. It could be argued that the adopted child will assimilate new ongoing information about birth parents (from the letterbox, face-to-face contact or from his or her adoptive parents) to his or her original internal working model, based on procedural memories. Although it seems likely that new information can build on earliest memories, if this information is not congruent with procedural memories this will result in the child experiencing dissonance, and a disconfirmation of their own experiences.

The impact of contact on the internal working model in covert losses
It would seem likely that some form of face-to-face or letterbox contact in these circumstances might produce information, and therefore updated semantic and episodic memories, which could build on early memories. If information from contact is congruent with earlier procedural memories, this will reassure a child and assist him or her to create a realistic model. If contact is responsive to his or her needs, it will confirm a positive view of the child as valued and worthy of care and attention. The adoptive parents can use this new information from contact and help the child integrate it into earlier memories and fantasy.

Internal working model in ‘overt losses’
Children who have been described as having ‘overt losses’ have memories of their parents, which are, to varying degrees, in awareness. Their internal working models will include procedural, semantic and episodic memories, as well as information and fantasy, which may or may not be consistent. For many adopted children, the creation of life-story books and memory stores have provided confirmation of their memories (although in some cases they may represent the memories of others that conflict with the child’s). The complexity of this stage will clearly be affected by the child’s previous relationship, and most late-adopted children, with overt losses, will not have had a secure attachment to their birth parents.

Crittenden (1990, 1992b) has conducted research on the internal working model of abused and neglected children. She found that abused children had parental models based on power and coercion, with models of themselves as incompetent and unworthy. Neglected children had models of unresponsive and helpless caregivers, and of themselves as ineffective in eliciting care. Children who are both abused and neglected experience a less consistent and predictable environment than either abused or neglected children. They are described as having a disorganised-disoriented attachment, and their models are likely to represent caregivers as hostile, unresponsive and unpredictable, and themselves as unworthy, ineffective and vulnerable (for more information, see also Howe, 1998; Howe et al, 1999).

Further information about abused and neglected children’s internal working models has been produced experimentally by using story-stem techniques, eg Fish and Condon (1994). These models were very persistent, even when children’s behaviour had matured (Main et al, 1985). More recently George (1996), studying internal working models through story completion tasks, says:

The doll play stories of disorganised six-year-olds revealed internal working models of attachment in which parents and adults failed to provide protection and safety. Their stories depicted parents and other adult figures as frightened, frightening, chaotic, and/or helpless. (p 416)

This evidence suggests clear memory-based models, which produce characteristic information and responses from abused and/or neglected children, but which they may find very difficult to recall coherently when placed with new parents and which, partly because of this, are very resistant to change. In addition, even when the child has learned to
behave in more adaptive ways, they may still retain their earlier ‘chaotic’ internal working model and negative, damaging view of self.

Bowlby (1980) and others (Crittenden, 1990, 1992b) also suggest that in a situation of abuse or rejection a child may react to this intolerable pain by defensively excluding from awareness the working model of the ‘bad’ unloving parent and retain conscious access only to the model of the ‘good’ parent, often by assuming the model of themselves as bad, and worthy of ill-treatment. In addition, if episodic memories of specific events are contradicted by semantic memories based on information from others, this can result in episodic memories, perhaps of experiences of abuse, being excluded from awareness in a manner that is also likely to be maladaptive to long-term adjustment.

It is argued here that children need a model of their birth parent, in order to mourn their loss. It is also clear that after abuse these models are confused, defended against and painful to recall or retrieve.

Hodge (1996) has suggested that her research shows that it is necessary for the adopted child to become aware of their internal working models of their birth parents, so that she or he can locate where the feelings appropriately belong. Similarly, Hughes (1997), who works therapeutically with adopted children, emphasises the need to identify the child’s model of her or his birth parents, and then differentiate it clearly from the current relationship. This has important implications for adoptive parents and those working with them, and underlines the importance of therapeutic help being available to children placed for adoption, particularly after abuse.

The impact of contact on the internal working model in ‘overt’ losses
Again it could be argued that letterbox information or face-to-face contact could assist in the process of clarifying the model of the birth parent. However, there seem to be a number of difficulties in using either form of contact for this purpose, which are often overlooked. The contact cannot recreate the child’s early experiences – that would clearly re-abuse the child. However, an unrealistic version, as can be created by very positive information through the letterbox (often assisted by a supportive social worker), is even more confusing, conflicts with memory information and may encourage excluding negative aspects of the birth parent from awareness, and confirming the child’s view of themselves as to blame for any abuse.

Clearly, information or contact is going to be painful and distressing at times and may involve what Nickman (1996) calls ‘definitive disillusionment’. Beek (1994), in a small study of face-to-face contact with mothers with severe mental health difficulties, found that contact helped a child ‘to combat the potential damage caused by carrying negative or frightening images of their birth mothers’ (p 40). Although these birth mothers had displayed bizarre behaviour, contact had dispelled fear and revulsion. However, it is clearly reality that is important in this situation.

The impact of ongoing contact, both face-to-face and information for children with memories of abuse, is clearly complex. It is vital to take into account the developmental stage of the child, to remember that children need information that is appropriate to their developmental level, and that the meaning of the information provided will vary with the level of understanding. It has been shown that often abused children exclude aspects of their abusing parents from awareness, and have an internal working model that is resistant to change. Contact attempts to counteract this, but can ignore a child’s developmental ability to cope with information, and, most importantly, a child’s need to maintain their defences until they are ready to cope with new information. It may be that at some stages of development a child needs to use fantasy to defend themselves against being overwhelmed by the impact of reality. As Smith (1995) says:

Sometimes the state intervenes into family life expressly in order to disrupt continuity and to provide children with alter-
In general, it seems that contact needs to enable a child to build on their early procedural, semantic and episodic memories, and to add semantic and perhaps episodic memories that are congruent and accessible to the child. In addition, it should assist him or her to understand and integrate earlier experiences, both positive and negative. This is a very complex task, and contact of various forms is likely to be only a part of this process. However, it is something that may need skilled help by a post-adoption service which fully understands the implications of contact for the child and his or her new parents, and must be clearly based on the individual situation and developmental needs of each child.

Mourning the loss

The adopted child has lost a significant relationship and will need to express their feelings of loss. I would argue that adopted children, like those bereaved, grieve by negotiating and renegotiating their relationship with the lost parent. This may be particularly difficult in an adoptive home. As Bowlby (1980) says of a child’s grief: ‘this may be testing for any new parent figure, for the inevitable comparisons may be painful’ (p 287).

I suggest that it might be useful to consider using Silverman and Nickman’s model (1996), developed with bereaved children, for this stage in an adopted child’s adaptation. Thus a child may need to:

- locate the birth parent – have a picture in their mind of where they live, and how they live their lives;
- experience the birth parent – be given permission to ‘converse’ with them;
- reach out and keep in touch – symbolically or actually;
- experience ‘waking’ memories;
- have linking objects.

However, the adopted child’s task may be in some ways more complicated than that of a bereaved child. The adopted child needs to mourn the loss of the birth family at the same time as forming new attachments, yet also update the internal working model as the ‘lost’ parent also changes over time.

To help a child achieve these tasks, adoptive parents may encounter a number of difficulties, alongside the emotional demands of the adoptive relationships:

- Children need carers who can model grief for a child, and give him or her permission to grieve (Bowlby, 1980).
- Reminiscing about the lost parent is important for mourning (Bowlby, 1980). However, adopted children have lost the use of their birth parents as custodians of their memories, especially if their age means their memories are limited or confused, so the adoptive parents need to help them actively in this reminiscence.
- The availability of memorabilia associated with the lost person is also important for mourning (Bowlby, 1980) and adoptive parents need to encourage a child to treasure memorabilia, but they may have limited access to this.
- Pynoos (1992) describes ‘empty situations’ that children experience as part of mourning – an absence of a parent, a change in the way something is done. Children progress in their cognitive maturity to register these empty situations, and young children may need help to recognise these moments and their reactions to them. The difficulty for the adopted child is that the adults in his or her life may not recognise these moments, or the child may never have the opportunity to test them, for example, never returning to the places they have been with the birth parent.
- Children who were pre-verbal at the time of the loss may require special assistance as they will require help in achieving the corresponding verbal translation required of their emotional and cognitive experience, and to ‘update’ their memories.

Thus it seems that even in ‘straightforward’ situations, adoptive parents might expect ongoing support and
guidance in their task. However, most of the children placed today have additional difficulties in negotiating this stage, because of the abuse they have suffered.

**Mourning after abuse**

The experience of loss is particularly complex when children have suffered trauma. Many children who have been abused or who have witnessed frequent violence will also have suffered some form of trauma (Green, 1985; Hendricks *et al*., 1993; Carroll, 1994). Eth and Pynoos (1985) argue that it is important to distinguish between grief and trauma. For example, in research children who had suffered a traumatic loss had both traumatic and grief dreams (Pynoos, 1992). The traumatic dreams could interfere with grief dreams, which were comforting, and often important to a child. Similarly, intrusive thoughts, images or sounds were frequently reported by children who witnessed violence, and this interfered with efforts to remember or reminisce. Children tried to avoid memories or any reminders of the events, as they feared their emotional response would overwhelm them. If their most recent and imprinted image of that person acted as a traumatic reminder, they tried to push this out of their mind and hence the grieving process was impeded.

It is clear that the emotional reactions following extreme, longstanding trauma described by Terr (1991) of ‘profound psychic numbing’, of spontaneous self-hypnosis, depersonalisation and dissociation, of rage, or extreme passivity, all mean that dealing with grief will be extremely complex. As Eth and Pynoos (1985) say, ‘co-existing trauma impairs grief work’ (p 175).

Children with insecure attachments also defend themselves against experiencing memories, as described in the previous section. It has been argued that recalling, reminiscing and sharing memories of a lost parent are important in the grieving process. It seems probable that this process is equally important when the memories are negative, confused, or confusing, but these factors suggest that grieving a loss after an ambivalent relationship will be particularly difficult and painful. The research of Pynoos (1992) found last memories and last contacts particularly potent, and comments:

**Dissatisfaction or a sense of incompleteness about these interactions, especially due to anger or guilt, can elicit strong wishes to repair this affective rupture.** (p 5)

These feelings will need to be addressed in the mourning process.

**The impact of contact on mourning**

There is some discussion in the literature about the effect of contact on the grieving process. Steinhauer (1980), using attachment theory and the mourning model, argues that contact with a birth parent facilitates and stimulates the mourning process by reactivating suppressed feelings and connecting them to their sources, acknowledging and confronting the issues between parent and child associated with the need for placement. However, using attachment and adoption literature, Eagle (1990) suggests that a child may first need to attach, to develop a trusting relationship with new carers, before he or she can permit him or herself to freely mourn losses.

Triseliotis (1991) uses evidence from divorce studies to argue for contact after adoption. He suggests that if previous relationships are severed on placement the feelings involved are not eradicated but driven underground, and such feelings can jeopardise the stability of the placement. However, alternative views are proposed in Mullender and Morley (1994), considering contact after divorce involving violence, when it is described for example as ‘inherently complex and fraught with danger’ (p 103).

There would seem to be a number of important factors to take into account when considering the impact of contact on the mourning process:

- Evidence from divorce studies (e.g. Wallerstein, 1983) suggests the importance of the child’s need to accept the permanence of the separation from
the parent. Fantasies about reunions with birth parents are extremely common among adopted children growing up, according to Brodzinsky (1990). Thus any ongoing contact must confirm and reinforce the permanence of the situation.

- Triseliotis (1991) argues that face-to-face contact means ‘the feelings of rejection that appear endemic in adoption may be eliminated or reduced’ (p 22). However, rather than avoiding feelings of rejection, information may confirm them, as when birth parents send information erratically, or do not respond at face-to-face contact in a way the child had hoped.
- In any form of contact the needs of the child must be paramount. Stogdon and Hall (1993) and Burnell (1993), using their experience as practitioners, have confirmed that in face-to-face contact following abuse the child’s needs may not be paramount. The child’s need for contact will vary over time but this could be difficult to manage, for birth parents. Smith (1995) also provides examples of continued contact with an abusing parent serving to keep the trauma alive for a child, rather than assisting in an adaptive grieving process.

If these factors are taken into account, and both the child and the adoptive parents are provided with the necessary support, there would seem to be good arguments for ongoing contact or information to assist a child with mourning the loss. However, the arguments for contact, whether letterbox or face-to-face, are rarely based on helping a child grieve and accept a loss, but rather on maintaining some form of relationship. The process of contact is often very painful for birth parents and would be additionally so if this was the expressed purpose.

Other relationships
I have referred to birth parent(s) throughout, but children placed for adoption past infancy are likely to have had a series of previous relationships which could have been significant, and experienced as attachment relationships. This could include grandparents, foster carers, other significant adults, and probably most importantly, in terms of decisions about ongoing contact, siblings. It is clear from the literature that siblings are of considerable significance, and there is evidence that younger children often form strong attachments to older siblings, that this can lead them to identify less with their parents, and that the loss of a sibling is frequently traumatic (see Elgar and Head, 1999). In addition, contact with a sibling can sometimes be viewed by a child as more important than with a birth parent (Harrison, 1999).

I suggest that it is equally valid to consider all these attachment relationships, in terms of memories, internal working models and mourning a loss. It is also equally important to identify the prior relationship, the meaning of contact for each individual children, based on their needs and developmental stage, and to provide support for the impact of contact, in the way described in previous sections. Smith (1995) describes, for example, the complex dynamics involved between siblings where abuse has occurred. Their individual and differing memories and models of their relationships all need to be understood and taken into account when considering contact.

Conclusions
Although professionals involved in working with all members of those involved in adoption describe the common experience as one of loss, it seems that little is actually known about an adopted child’s experience of loss, with the exception of the ‘traditional’ closed baby adoption, of which there are very few in Britain today (Department of Health, 1990).

It is clear that many further questions need to be answered by research. These include: the relationship between the child’s previous internal working model, and their experience of loss; how adoptive parents can help their child ‘update’ their internal working model of themselves and their attachment figures; what is likely to be the effect of siblings in an adoptive family, with their differing relationships with their parents, and differing responses to loss; how different models of birth mother and birth father
are created and what impact the gender of the child has on these.

Many further questions need to be addressed and answered before we are fully equipped to help today’s adopted child. However, what is clear is that coping with loss in adoption in today’s circumstances is a very complex task. Both the adoptive parents, and in some situations a therapist, have an important role in helping the child to:

- identify and bring into awareness an internal working model of the self and the birth parents;
- assimilate ongoing information, and accommodate their current model to new information;
- negotiate and accommodate a ‘relationship’ with the birth parents within their new family that is adaptive and consistent with their well-being, by meeting their current developmental needs.

Children’s ability to do this and the amount of help required will vary with individual circumstances and individual resilience, as well as other resources within the child’s family system. However, it is evident that services for adopted children, adoptive parents and birth parents must be available post adoption, and all need help and support to enable any form of contact to be of benefit to the child.

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