Critical issues when supporting adoptive families: meeting children’s needs related to adoption and early harm

Professor Elsbeth Neil
Permanence options in England

Least legal security

- Long term foster care
- Residence order
- Special guardianship
- Adoption

Most legal security
Adoption of children from care

• Adoption is a legal process permanently extinguishing the parental responsibility of the child’s birth parent(s) and transferring it to the adoptive parent(s).
• Most children are adopted from care and are under age 5.
• Court must establish that child has been, or is likely to be, ‘significantly harmed’ by parents.
• Parental consent can be dispensed with if the court consider this necessary for child’s welfare.
Adopted children’s needs

Universal needs
- Love, belonging, safety, stability
- Guidance, boundaries, opportunities

Coping with early harm
- Recovery from maltreatment/ changes of caregiver
- Genetic predispositions to risk

Adoption related needs
- Building sense of identity
- Managing loss and stigma
“We both have big hearts with the capacity to love others quickly!”

But is love enough?
Selwyn et al, 2015: Beyond the Adoption Order

• Estimates post order adoption disruption rate at between 2-9%: mostly those placed over age 4 and teenagers at time of disruption

• Survey of adoptive parents: just over third going well, 30% ups and downs, 25% severe problems, 9% disrupted.

• Some children had multiple and overlapping difficulties
A longitudinal study

Contact after adoption

Pre-school

Middle childhood

Adolescence

Centre for Research on Children & Families

University of East Anglia
The research

- Mixed methods study, begun in 1996
- All children under 4 years (m=21m) when placed for adoption, most adopted from care
- Time 1: pre-school: survey at time of placement and interviews 2 years later
- Time 2: middle childhood, mean age 8
- **Time 3 late adolescence, mean age 18**
Time 3: key findings

2012-13: late adolescence
Adoption outcomes: the good news

• Almost all families intact and young person loved and supported by parents
• 90% of young people rated relationship with parents very highly
• Life satisfaction robust: 67% scored 7/10 or higher
• Most young people (80%) reported good self-esteem/self-liking
Emotional and behavioural problems

48% had internalising problems

44% had externalising problems

Problems had often increased since middle childhood
Overall adoption outcomes at mean age 18 (N=65)

**Thriving (51%)**
- Loved and supported
- Happy
- No significant problems
- Engaged and achieving to best of ability

**Surviving (29%)**
- Loved and supported
- Current problems of moderate intensity
- Past problems settling

**Struggling (20%)**
- Relationships with parents strained
- Unhappy
- Most not living at home
- Problems of very severe intensity
Problems related to early harm

• Attachment difficulties (Van den Dries, 2009)
• Defiance, inattention, hyperactivity (Quinton, 2012)
• Autistic spectrum disorders (Selwyn et al, 2015)
• Trauma related anxiety (Tarren-Sweeney, 2008)
• Neurobiological problems (Grotevant & McDermott, 2013)
Understanding adoption outcomes (Neil et al, 2015)

• Pre-placement risks
• Genetic predispositions
• Pre-birth risks
• Post-placement risks: e.g. bereavement, divorce, bullying
• Normal transitions: high school, puberty
• Resilient pathways: post-placement protective factors esp. quality of adoptive family life and provision of support
Support needs and barriers

Needs
- Educational help
- Disability services
- Financial/practical help
- Specialist child & family mental health support
- Help building attachments

Barriers
- “Nobody believed me”
- “Nobody talks about it because you don’t want to think you’ve failed”
- Services not ‘adoption sensitive’
- Inappropriate responses e.g. child protection
- Lack of funding: “We were left high and dry”
What works in preventing and treating poor mental health?

- Early help
- Attachment
- Social learning/behaviour management
- Follow up support

Children’s needs: implications for recruiting adopters

• Be open minded about who can adopt
• Help enquirers to see adoption as “a family for developmental recovery” (Quinton,
• Help enquirers to see ‘the child’ not just their problems
• Stretching preferences (but not too far!)
• Adopter led matching
• Normalising expectation re support
Adopted children’s needs

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Adoption as ‘clean break’

Problems of closed adoption (loss and identity)

Openness in adoption: the adoption kinship network
Adoption and Children Act 2002

Contact planning during the adoption process
• A duty to consider what post adoption contact the child should have, and to set out the plan
• The child’s welfare throughout his or her life should be the paramount consideration

Post-adoption support
• Local authorities must provide assistance for contact arrangements
What contact is planned for adopted children? (Neil, 2000; 2002)

Contact planned in most cases but...

• Only a minority have face-to-face (direct) contact with parents

• Widespread use of mediated letter (indirect) contact

• Most contact infrequent (1-2 times a year) and voluntary
Brodzinsky’s ‘stress and coping’ model of adoption adjustment

Adoption is inherently associated with *overt and covert loss and stigma* related experiences and hence is potentially stressful for children.

Once children understand the meaning and implications of adoption, sensitivity and ambivalence may emerge. *Avoiding* this stress is not always helpful.
Brodzinsky (2005): ‘Adoption Communication Openness’

“regardless of whether a child grows up in a traditionally closed or open adoption, what is primary for healthy psychological adjustment is the creation of an open, honest, nondefensive, and emotionally attuned family dialogue” (p. 151)

Adoption communication openness: (Neil, 2007, BJSW)

- Face-to-face contact was associated with higher levels of ACO
Benefits of contact for adopted young people

1. Information Needs
2. Relationships
3. Openness in Adoptive Family
[My parents have] always been really open about it, we don’t have to be scared of ‘can we talk about our birth family in front of them, will they get upset?’

[Getting letters back] makes you kind of feel that even though we’re not with them, they still care,...they didn’t just completely dismiss us.

It’s nice to be able to see her and have a complete picture of her ...[What I’ve got out of contact is] knowing who she is and what she was like, rather than thinking ‘she could be like this’ - it’s like you can have this whole little fantasy world ..and once you see her, you know it’s not going to happen.
17 year, face-to-face contact with birth mother and grandmother

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

- Emotional strain
- Managing loss
- Unanswered questions
It’s upsetting to see her how she is, but I like to see that she is okay and that she’s safe.

It is good to know I was being thought of, but at the same time I still feel like they think they know me and I don't feel like I know them.

I don’t know how she feels. That’s one of the horrible questions that I ask probably on a weekly basis ‘what happens if I get to 18 and she doesn’t like me? I felt like I’d been led on through the letter contact because I thought that she was this amazing woman and then she turned out to not be that at all.
Neil et al, 2015: Adoptive identity

- Cohesive
- Developing
- Unexplored
- Fragmented

Who am I? Why was I adopted?
Identity patterns

• Unexplored (N=5): at ease with very simple adoption story
• Developing (n=5): feeling ‘there’s got to be more to it’
• Cohesive (n=16): worked through, balanced view of adoption that makes sense
• Fragmented (n=6): strong negative feelings, lack of coherence in adoption narrative
All I know is when my birth mum was born, her mum didn’t have a very good upbringing so didn’t really know how to look after her...so when it came to having kids she didn’t know how to bring us up...she mixed with the wrong people and with drugs ...it was safer for us to be adopted.  [Meeting my birth mum], it just kind of made me understand in a way why she did it and that ...even though she’s part of my life, she’s not a big part of my life.  (19yr female: cohesive identity)
I have no idea [why I was adopted], it could be completely different. That’s the story that I’ve been told, but I have no idea. It’s that uncertainty which hurts.

*What does adoption mean to you?*

…I don’t know if you understand the degree that it bothers me…and it can bother me daily, even now, its like a burn

(17yr old male, fragmented identity)
Was contact linked to identity?

• 84% of those with ‘cohesive’ identity were having birth family contact (versus 44% of others)

• Levels of adoptive parent adoption communication openness higher for those in ‘cohesive identity’ group, and lowest in ‘fragmented’ group.

• Key role of adoptive parents in facilitating identity development though communication and contact
Steps to identity coherence

- Open minded parents chose some contact
- Contact helps parents empathise with birth family
- Child gets direct information about birth family
- Contact helps parents and children talk
- Child explores and processes thoughts and feelings
Factors Associated with Beneficial Contact

- Birth relative supportive attitude
- Communicaively open adopters
- Child’s good relationship with adopters
- Child placed very young
- Child has positive relationship with birth relative
- Adopters and birth relative collaboration

(Neil et al, 2011)
Planning and supporting contact

What are goals/purpose/needs?

Assess strengths/risks

Review

How can this contact support this child?

Plan support for contact

Provisional contact plan

Support suspension of contact

What else?
Other support : adoption needs

- Managing social media
- Information gathering/archiving
- Direct work with child/young people
- Support for adopted adults with ‘searching’
- Support adopters to be ‘communicatively open’
- And to help children understand ethnicity and deal with racism and stigma
Key conclusions

• Adoption can work well to provide children with a supportive and loving family for life.

• Many children will have ongoing developmental issues.

• Contact and family communication about adoption have a role to play in promoting exploration and understanding of adoption issues.

• Recruiting and supporting the right adopters is key.
Professor Beth Neil  
Centre for Research on Children & Families  
School of Social Work  
University of East Anglia  
e.neil@uea.ac.uk

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

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