



Is your adopted child now an adult and thinking about making contact with their birth family?

What do parents need to know?

The research

In 2010 the Support After Adoption team commissioned some research from the University of Nottingham into the experiences of young adults aged 18 to 25 who had decided to renew contact with their birth families.

What these young people had in common was the fact that as young children they had been removed from their birth families because of serious concern about their safety and wellbeing. Care proceedings had been held and a court had eventually ruled that it was not in their best interests to return to their birth families and that they should instead be placed in adoptive families.

14 adoptees were involved, which although only a small sample, is the first research of its kind.

What did we want to find out?

We were keen to learn from the experience of these young people. In particular, we wanted to learn more about the extent to which they remained in touch with their birth relatives over time and about whether there had been changes as time went on. We wanted to learn how in the future we might be able to better support young adopted adults, and their birth and adoptive parents.

Leaflet for young adoptees

We have produced a separate colourful leaflet for adopted adults which includes many quotes and examples of the experiences of the young people as they had access to their records and went on to have a reunion. (Please ask for a copy)

Natural curiosity

The researcher, Kate Wilson, in her conclusions, reflected on an absorbing chapter about adoption by Simmonds (2000) in which he explores the relevance of the idea of personal narratives to our understanding of the experiences of adopted children and adults. He suggests that however their story is constructed, it is a story which invites curiosity, and this curiosity invariably leads to another story which is complex, painful and maybe unpalatable. It is a story in which rejection, abandonment and failure are realities and a happy ending cannot be routinely written into the script... 'The story will not routinely have a happy ending until the painful narratives of the birth parents, the adoptive parents and the child are woven together.' (Simmonds, 2000, pp30-31)

The experiences in our study provide evidence of the truth of Simmonds' observations about the ways in which adoptees struggle to address and resolve what he calls the 'problems of curiosity' about their birth and adoption stories. Our study confirms that, for many, the fact of being adopted, and curiosity about it, seems to be a preoccupying concern throughout childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Those who reported positive feelings about their adoption seem to be just as likely to go on to seek a reunion as those who had mixed or negative feelings.

Finding information from records

Our study confirms that the experience of receiving information from their records is powerful, whether positive or negative. Although a majority had been given information which was unpleasant and which they found distressing, even those who had described the information received as 'bad' went on to record at least one item which had been helpful; in many cases it made them more understanding of their birth parents and in fifty per cent of the cases the information made them more interested in seeking contact with their birth relatives. So while it is right, when preparing new adoptee seekers of information, to alert them to the potential painfulness of what they will find, it is also the case in the experiences of this group that 'some good comes out of it' and that despite what they find, young people are not discouraged from going on to seek reunion with birth relatives.

All those in the study had told their adoptive parents of what they were doing and all but one, who had had to address her adoptive mother's anger about it, had been met with support even when this was mingled with anxiety.

The outcome of reunions

However, the experience of meeting birth relatives was for this group often a painful or mixed one. Few went on to develop what might be seen as a meaningful relationship with their birth relatives and many described, sometimes with dismay, the unsatisfactory and disappointing nature of what they found. A majority felt that they were more like strangers rather than feeling that they 'belonged'. Few maintained a close relationship beyond the first year.

Differences from the reunions of adopted people not adopted from care

The above experiences seem to be in marked contrast to the experiences traced by the Howe and Feast study (2000) of reunion experiences of adoptees involved in more traditional adoptions from the 1950's to 1970's. These involved birth parents, often single mothers, who voluntarily gave up their offspring, usually as babies, and are likely to be able to offer more stable and emotionally confirming relationships than those who had their children compulsorily removed.

For most of the young adults in our study, finding out how needy or damaged their birth parents were, and how rarely they seemed able to acknowledge or face up to the circumstances which had led to the adoption, was clearly a painful experience. Some were also struck by the material surroundings of their birth relatives. The material and educational circumstances in which these young adopted people grew up are often markedly different to those of their birth families and the contrast is likely to form another emotional challenge in a reunion.

Understanding their history

Some comments also suggest another hazard of the process for this group of adoptees, in that the explanations given by their birth families may not fit with those given by their adoptive parents. For one respondent this was clearly the case (and she comments that she is 'inclined to believe' her adopters), but other comments suggest this discrepancy.

The positives effects on adoptive family relationships

On the positive side though, none of the adoptees regretted having met their birth relatives. All seem to have felt some benefit from doing so, either in terms of enhanced feelings about their identity, or feeling that the meeting 'filled a gap' or both. For many, relationships with their adoptive families improved and in no case worsened beyond the short term, with few experiencing a conflict of loyalties between adoptive and birth parents. For some too it seems to have helped them accept what had happened, perhaps by confirming what they had been told, or by helping them to recognize fully the reality of just how bad the circumstances had been which had led to their adoption.

The experience of going through a reunion as an adult, seeing people and finding out information for oneself seems likely psychologically to enable the process of acceptance and of resolving feelings of doubts, loss and ambivalence.

Summary

Above all, then, the experience of seeking information from adoption records, and of making contact with birth relatives, perhaps needs to be seen as an important step through which individual adoptees gain access to those aspects of their personal stories which have been unknown. Seeking information and meeting birth relatives may be essential to the process described above of building identity through the weaving together of the narratives of adopters, birth relatives and adoptees. Even where the information and experiences are painful and do not yield the fairy tale 'happy endings' which may be yearned for, they are perhaps a necessary part of the process of laying claim to the individual adoptee's personal history and inheritance and enabling them to make sense of themselves and their world.

A word about using Facebook and other social media to find birth family

Since our research was undertaken there has been a growing trend of young people using Facebook and other people-finding sites to trace and contact birth family, often before they are 18. This has proved to be a very risky way to make contact as there is no opportunity for preparation, mediation, safeguarding checks, etc and no time to reflect. The young people can end up revealing a lot of personal information about themselves to people they don't really know and they won't be able to control who else gets to see it. When an approach is made via social media the other person's circumstances are unknown and reconnection can occur within hours. It's much safer if a social worker acts as an intermediary to make contact on their behalf, and who can then offer support to all parties. As contact can also be made the other way round, i.e. birth family searching for the child, it is recommended parents advise their children about the risks and encourage them to put maximum privacy settings onto their Facebook account.

If you would like more information, advice or support with contact and reunion please contact the Support After Adoption team.

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Weighbridge Road
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Telephone help line: 01623 437988 at the following times:

Mondays 9.30 – 1.00 pm

Alternate Tuesdays 4.00 – 7.30pm

Thursdays 1.00 – 4.00pm

Email us: support.afteradoption@nottscc.gov.uk