

Open Adoption: Rethinking Family

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Open adoption involves contact between a child's birth and adoptive family members over time, creating an adoptive kinship network that connects his or her families of birth and adoption. Although contact is most common in the case of domestic infant adoptions, it is becoming increasingly common in adoptions from the child welfare system (Neil, 2019, in this publication series) and in international adoptions (Baden, 2013). This change reflects a growing professional consensus that contact with birth family members can be in the best interest of the child (Siegel & Smith, 2012), but also the awareness that closed adoptions are increasingly difficult to maintain, given the use of the internet (Whitesel & Howard, 2013) and genetic testing services (Rosenbaum, 2018) to find relatives.

Open adoptions vary quite widely. Contact between adoptive and birth family members can involve the direct exchange of information (through letters, photos, gifts, personal visits) and through the use of technology (email, texting, social media, Skype, etc.) Contact can also be indirect, in the case when the adoption agency is used to mediate communication by removing identifying information before sending information to the other party. Sometimes open adoptions involve contact among a broad number of extended family members; at other times, it may only involve a few people, such as the adoptive parents and child's birth mother. Openness can also vary in frequency and intensity of contact. In other words, the experience of open adoption can be quite varied and can change over time (Grotevant, Wrobel, Fiorenzo, Lo, & McRoy, 2019).

Domestic Infant Adoptions

For thirty years, our Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP) team (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013) has been following 190 adoptive families and 169 birth mothers in which their children were placed for adoption as infants through private adoption agencies in the US in the late 1970s to early 1980s. (For details, visit our project website at <https://www.umass.edu/ruddchair/research/mtarp>)

When open adoptions were first contemplated in the 1970s, three major concerns were cited: **a)** adopted children would be confused about who their "real" parents were, **b)** birth mothers would never recover from the grief and loss experienced by the placement, and **c)** adoptive parents would not feel entitled to act as their child's full parent because of the birth parents' presence. None of these concerns has been confirmed by the data from our project. Adolescents experiencing open adoptions are not confused about who their parents are, and can readily understand that multiple adults care for them and have distinctive roles in their lives (Grotevant, Wrobel, Von Korff, Skinner, Newell, Friese, & McRoy, 2007). Birth mothers with contact experience less unresolved grief than those with no contact or contact that stopped; the contact allows them to be reassured about their child's well-being (Christian, McRoy, Grotevant, & Bryant, 1997; Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2007). And adoptive parents with contact do not fear their child will be reclaimed, in part because of their ability to talk

directly with their child's birth relatives about this. The most significant fears were experienced by adoptive parents in closed adoptions, whose ideas about birth parents' intentions are based on stereotypes and media horror stories (Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Favel, 1994).

For adopted children, contact provides them with an understanding of their birth relatives as real people. We found that, across all levels of contact, adolescents most wanted to gain an adult understanding of why they were placed for adoption (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009), and that emerging adults (who were beginning to think about entering into committed relationships and having children) most wanted to have information about their family health history (Wrobel & Grotevant, 2019). Contact with birth relatives provides an important source for such information.

Contact by itself was not directly associated with adjustment outcomes for adolescent or emerging adult adoptees, but their satisfaction with the contact was. Adolescents and emerging adults who were more satisfied with their contact demonstrated better psychological adjustment than those who were dissatisfied with their arrangements (Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, & Gonzalez, 2011). Development of a satisfying relationship evolves over time in the context of daily interaction, and depends on strong communication skills, the ability to maintain boundaries, and flexibility in day-to-day interaction, all supported by a belief that contact is in the best interest of the child (Grotevant, 2009).



Adoptions from the Child Welfare System

In the US, when a child is removed from his or her family because of maltreatment, attempts are made to help reunify the child and family once the danger to the child has been removed or remediated. However, when that becomes impossible and parental rights are terminated by the court, the child can be adopted. Currently, most children in the US who are placed through the child welfare system are adopted by their foster parents (51%) or a relative (35%) (USDHHS, 2018). Despite the fact that the child is separated from his or her family of origin, the growing consensus is that facilitating contact between the child and birth family can be in the child's best interest when there is no risk to the child's safety and the birth parents are able to participate in helpful ways. Even when birth parents are not able to participate, other relatives such as siblings and grandparents may provide important enduring connections for the child. Contact in adoptions from care is becoming increasingly common in the United Kingdom (see Neil, 2019, in this publication series) and in the Australian state of New South Wales (del Pozo de Bolger, Dunstan, & Kaltner, 2018). In NSW, contact has been promoted for three reasons: reassurance (of the child, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents), identity, and continuity (Wright, 2018). Legislation requires that written post-adoption contact agreements (PACAs) be developed between the prospective adoptive parents (usually the child's foster parents) and the child's birth parents. PACAs are increasingly being used in the US as well, and are legally enforceable in a growing number of states (see Allisan, 2019, in this publication series).

Contact in adoptions from care seems to work best when the child's adoptive parents are able to facilitate open and honest dialogue with the child about adoption (e.g., rated high in communicative openness; Brodzinsky, 2006) and when the child's birth relatives have accepted the finality of the adoptive placement (Neil, 2009). Outcomes for children are also more positive when the birth and adoptive parents are able to develop a collaborative relationship on the child's behalf (Boyle, 2017).

International Adoptions

Although much less is known about contact in international adoptions, it is becoming more common. A number of factors add complexity to the desire for contact, including cultural differences in understanding of the meaning of adoption. An important cautionary tale has emerged from research conducted with women from the Marshall Islands who placed children for adoption in the US (Roby & Matsumura, 2002). Because the Marshallese are a communal culture, child-rearing is often shared among adults, and children come and go among homes flexibly while they are growing up. The concept of “termination of parental rights” is not compatible with such views of family. Many birth mothers from the Marshall Islands believed that the children they placed for adoption would return to them once they were adults and add their skills and talents (acquired in the US) to the local community. Similar challenges have been noted in adoptions from South Africa to Finland (Högbacka, 2016). Insights gleaned from these studies underscore the importance of ensuring cross-cultural understanding and protecting expectant parents from exploitation.

Other challenges arising with contact in international adoptions involve the bringing of shame to the child’s birth mother or birth family, because of the stigma of parenthood outside of marriage (e.g., Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012). Contact in international adoption also involves many logistical challenges, including travel across long distances, language barriers, and large economic disparities.

The number of children being adopted across international boundaries has been steadily declining for over a decade; some argue that international adoption may disappear (see Baden, 2019, in this publication series, for discussion). Nevertheless, over one million children were adopted internationally between the end of World War II and 2010 (Selman, 2009), and many of those adopted persons are seeking more information about or contact with their birth relatives. Thus, greater understanding of contact in the case of international adoptions is needed.

Conclusion

Acceptance of open adoption requires re-thinking and expanding our definition of family. Embracing the concept of the adoptive kinship network provides perspectives that will facilitate and normalize the experience of post-adoption contact among birth and adoptive family members. Significant movement toward more openness is being experienced in domestic infant adoptions, placements from the child welfare system, and international adoptions. As the field becomes better informed by research and the lived experience of adoptive kinship network members, improvements in adoption practice and policy will follow, providing support that will further the best interests of adopted persons.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Research

In general, much more research is needed in order to guide formulation of best practices and to shape policy at multiple levels.

- More descriptive longitudinal research examining the management of family dynamics and outcomes for children in adoptive kinship networks experiencing various types and degrees of contact is needed. This work should attend to the specific issues encountered in infant, child welfare, and international adoptions. It should also include single- and two-parent adoptive families as well as families headed by same-sex couples. Experiences of family members such as siblings and grandparents should be included.
- Greater attention needs to be given to the development of theories applicable to complex families, such as those in open adoption, foster care, guardianship, and those formed through the use of assisted reproductive technologies. Theories about interpersonal relationships (e.g., emotional distance regulation theory; Grotevant, 2009) and about family systems (e.g., Fiese, Jones, & Saltzman, 2019) are important starting points, but with the proliferation of complex families (e.g., Golombok, 2015), new family theories are needed.
- Especially in regards to international adoption, culturally-sensitive research is needed to better

understand the degree to which perspectives of adoptive and birth parents are aligned and to suggest ways in which adoptive and birth relatives can best transcend potential national, cultural, and language barriers.

- As Post Adoption Contact Agreements are increasingly used and are legally enforceable in some jurisdictions (Allisan, 2019, in this publication series), research is needed to better understand their impact and to inform best practices in their use.
- The role of social media in adoption must be better understood, and it must acknowledge the rapidly changing landscape of social media use as well as developmental considerations for social media use by children.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Practice

Open adoption implies a life-long transformation of one's family to become an adoptive kinship network; adoption practice must be attuned to the needs of these families.

- The safety and well-being of the child must be the most important consideration in adoption practice. If they cannot be ensured in the case of a particular child, alternative plans should be considered.
- The skills used in navigating open adoption relationships can be learned, and professionals can support contact through informal, psychoeducational, and therapeutic means.
- Professionals working with adoptive kinship network members in open adoptions must be adoption-competent. As the field evolves, they must seek continuing professional education in order to provide the best service to their clients.
- The work of the adoption professionals is not finished at placement; their guidance must be available across the life-span whenever needed by clients. Such professionals must understand complex family systems and the specific core issues of adoption as they are experienced by adopted persons, birth parents, and adoptive parents over time.
- The cost of services should not be a barrier to access. New models for funding post-adoption services are needed.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Policy

Adoption policy and legislation must take into account the complexities involved in open adoptions.

- Despite the fact that adoptive kinship networks will continue to evolve, the gold standard should continue to be the best interest of the child. Because each adoptive kinship network includes a different mix of birth and adoptive parents, broad policies should always provide room for individual judgment and flexibility.
- Especially for children in foster care or adopted through the child welfare system, states' laws should be reviewed to make sure that they acknowledge the growing acceptance of contact between children and their birth relatives over time; they should be changed as necessary to fit with the new reality.
- Agencies must insure that detailed health and medical information is gathered from expectant parents prior to placement, that such information is transmitted in full to adoptive parents, and that connections are established for updated medical information from birth relatives to be transmitted over time.

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