

The psychology of post-adoption contact

A study of the different types of post-adoption contact, and the criteria by which a psychologist may make a recommendation in a disputed case

by Richard Woolfson

When a natural parent wants to have contact with their natural child after the child has been adopted (post-adoption contact) but the adoptive parents oppose such an arrangement, court cases are typically highly contentious. And there are good psychological reasons for this.

On the one hand, the natural parent faces a potential double whammy when the adoption is granted (permanent loss of parental rights and permanent loss of all contact), and therefore this is likely to have huge emotional impact on them. Small wonder, then, that the natural parent may fight for post-adoption contact, especially if they did not willingly give up their child for adoption – for example, the child was taken into care by the local authority because of the parent’s inability to provide safe and nurturing parenting.

On the other hand, the adoptive parents have waited a long time for a child of their own, and they also know that the child they now love had a very difficult home life prior to coming into their care. Therefore, it is understandable that they would prefer their adopted child to have a fresh start, so that the child can begin their new life without any encumbrance from the past. Small wonder, then, that the adoptive parents may fight to oppose post-adoption contact. The court is tasked to find a resolution of such disputes, which are even more challenging if the child is too young to express their own opinion.

Types of post-adoption contact

There are many variations of post-adoption contact between natural parents and their child – in fact, McRoy (1991)(1) and Fretter (1991)(2) identified more than 30 different categories. However, Triseliotis *et al* (2011)(3) summarised these and divided them into three general types, namely, indirect contact, direct contact, and no contact.

In the remainder of this article, I will describe the main research findings which explore the psychological impact of each type of contact on the children involved, and will outline how a psychologist as expert witness can help the court reach a decision in such cases. While each case is determined on its individual specific characteristic (including the specific individuals involved, the specific family background, and the specific parent-child attachment), the wider research findings provide a broader perspective. As Neil *et al* noted: “Contact in itself is neither

good nor bad. What is important is the extent to which it promotes or impedes the child's capacity to address the psychological challenges of adoption"(p19)(4).

1. Indirect contact post-adoption

The most common form of indirect contact post-adoption is "postbox" (also known as "letterbox") which typically is an ongoing exchange of letters and/or cards and photographs between natural parents and their child, mediated by the local authority or adoption agency(5). The natural parents and their child never meet, however. Letters from the natural parent can be given to the child on receipt or can be stored, unopened, until the adoptive parents decide that the child is mature enough to read and understand them.

Psychological advantages of indirect contact

The adopted child is protected psychologically from having to understand and come to terms with their personal background because they don't have to share affection between two sets of parents nor make sense of why their natural parents are unable to look after them(6). (The child is also protected physically from their natural parents, which is always a major consideration if there has been a history of abuse.) Adoptive parents and natural parents are able to manage postbox contact with much less assistance needed from professionals which suggests the child copes more easily with the psychological demands(7).

Many local authorities advise that this type of indirect contact helps the adopted child to understand more about their background, keeps up and continues the links between the child and their important birth relatives, reassures the child that their birth family continues to take an interest in their welfare, helps prepare the child for the possibility of future direct contact when they become an adult, and helps the adopted child feel both accepted in their adoptive family and comfortable about their natural roots and origins(8)(9)(10).

Psychological disadvantages of indirect contact

This form of contact also carries potential psychological disadvantages for the child. For example, the child may develop expectations about communications that are not met and therefore be disappointed, emotive language may be used in the letters, and the child may romanticise their relationship with the natural parent(11). In addition, a natural parent might underplay the impact of their former negative behaviour towards the child(12), and the child may be disappointed or upset if there is a delay in communications(13).

There are also the further risks that social workers mistakenly view this indirect contact as risk-free and therefore don't bother to manage it effectively, that some birth parents and adopters

have difficulty coping with the practicalities, and that there is confusion about what constitutes good practice(14). Postbox contact does not allow a child to ask their natural parents about the circumstances that led to their adoption, and some social services insist that natural parents do not use words which express love and affection or which suggest that they might meet one day in the future(15).

2. Direct contact post-adoption

With this type of contact, the natural parent has face-to-face direct contact with their child after the adoption is granted. The contact may be supervised (by a social work or adoption agency) or it may be unsupervised, can last between one hour and several hours, and can take place in a contact centre or in another location agreed jointly by the natural parents and the adopters. On average, when direct contact post-adoption is arranged, it tends to take place every three or four months, although it might be only once a year or as frequent as once a month(16).

Psychological advantages of direct contact

Direct face-to-face post-adoption contact has the potential psychological benefits of allowing the child and their birth relatives to maintain their existing relationship, providing reassurance to the child and the birth parents about each other's welfare, helping the child to deal with issues of identity and loss, and helping the child manage effectively their dual connection to both their adoptive family and their birth family(17). Conversely, where an attachment exists between the natural parents and their child before the adoption, lack of direct contact post-adoption will create an emotional loss for the child who may feel abandoned or even rejected by their natural parents(18).

Direct contact enables the child to integrate the dual concepts of their natural family and their adopted family, helping the child develop psychologically without any feelings of guilt or torn loyalties(19)(20). There is no significant evidence that face-to-face contact after adoption has an adverse effect on child development(21), and young children who experienced direct contact still view it positively when followed up in adolescence(22).

Psychological disadvantages of direct contact

There are concerns that direct post-adoption contact between the natural parents and their child could confuse the child and stop them from settling into their adoptive family, and could leave the child vulnerable to further psychological harm if the natural parents were neglectful or abusive(23). Another potential risk is that the natural parents could use direct contact to undermine the adoption, after the adoption process is complete(24). Even where direct contact

appears to be satisfactory, the child can still experience psychological harm which may not be easily recognised by the adults(25).

A child can become unsettled or disturbed by a post-adoption direct contact session with their natural parents, particularly when there is a history of abuse or neglect, when there are poor quality interactions with the natural parents during a contact session, when the natural parents deny previous abuse, when the natural parents deliberately avoid their child's questions about the past, or when the natural parents are late for contact sessions(26). Children can struggle with direct contact when there is unresolved tension between the adults(27).

3. No contact post-adoption

With this arrangement, once the adoption process is concluded, there is no contact of any sort between the natural parents and their child. In some instances, information about the natural parents is given to the adoptive parents, who can then choose to pass this to the child at some later point; in fewer instances, birth parents are allowed to send cards or letters to the adoptive parents. Also termed "closed" adoptions, these arrangements create a complete and long-lasting break between the natural parents and their child once the adoption is granted.

Psychological advantages of no contact

Few, if any, professionals now support the general principle of no post-adoption contact whatsoever. However, during the period when this arrangement was supported (generally until the mid-70s), it was thought that no contact after the adoption would give the adopted child a clean break and a fresh start, without having to be influenced by their previous family history, and therefore was seen to be a relatively simple, pain-free and satisfying solution to what is essentially a very complicated web of relationships(28). It was thought no contact would permit the child to move on with their life, as if their previous family life did not exist(29); and that it would protect children born to unmarried mothers from being branded with the stigma of "illegitimate" and the social ridicule that could arise from such negative labelling(30).

Some argued that a closed adoption, with no contact at all, was the only way to protect the child psychologically and that, conversely, direct contact would cause the child psychological damage(31). There was a concern that contact with natural parents could reduce a child's ability to bond with their adoptive parents(32).

Psychological disadvantages of no contact

There is substantial research evidence that no contact after adoption is psychologically unhealthy for the child because it blocks the child's need to discover their biological roots and to find out the reasons why their adoption took place(33). Adopted children who have no contact with their birth parents describe how this secrecy leaves them feeling that part of themselves is missing, that they are powerless and that they don't have the same rights as everyone else in society to access their own biological information(34). Furthermore, the strategy of no contact post-adoption can result in the child experiencing "genealogical bewilderment"(35).

There is also the risk that denial of the child's genetic background, and the corresponding failure to acknowledge its difference from the child's adoptive background, could have a negative impact on family communications(36). Where adopted children have no contact with their natural parents, they often experience identity conflicts which can lead to shame, embarrassment and loss of self-esteem(37), and they may worry they were given away because there is something wrong with them(38).

Making a psychological recommendation about contact

When considering the relevance and importance of the above research findings, a psychologist as expert witness may take into account several factors, including the design of the research study (for example, randomised controlled, single case, longitudinal, cohort, meta-analysis), the size and nature of the study (for example, type of participants, number of participants, participant selection criteria, time span), the data collection methods (for example, qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods) and the type of journal in which the study is published (for example, peer-refereed, high/low impact). Different psychologists may give different weighting to each of these factors when considering a study's relevance in a particular case.

Although the above research findings provide a broad outline of the potential psychological advantages and disadvantages of each post-adoption contact arrangement – and therefore will usually be considered by a psychologist as expert witness when making a recommendation to the court – not every research finding applies to every child, to every natural parent or to every adoptive parent. Human nature is not as predictable.

Therefore, a psychologist as expert witness in such cases has to consider other factors, in addition to research findings, when making a recommendation about direct contact because much also depends on the individuals involved. But what other factors should a psychologist take into account? Although there are no universally-accepted practice guidelines on this matter, Triseliotis,1991(39) provided a useful aid to decision-making by proposing four key criteria when considering direct contact post-adoption. These are:

Criterion 1: The child should appear to enjoy direct contact and benefit from it

A psychologist can assess this in various ways. If the child is old enough and of sufficient maturity and understanding, a psychologist as expert witness will encourage the child to express their own views about their enjoyment and perceived benefits from contact with their natural parents, and those views will have a significant influence on the psychologist's recommendation. However, many contentious contact cases involve young children (under the age of three or four years) who are not able to express their views verbally and maturely.

Therefore, another crucial source of evidence comes from the psychologist's first-hand observation of a direct contact session between the natural parent and their child – this provides an opportunity to assess directly the nature of the child-parent interactions. Where this is not possible (for example, the adoptive parents or the agency supporting the adoption refuse to allow a direct contact session for the purpose of observation), the psychologist will usually interview the principal adults involved (for example, the adoptive parents, the natural parents, the supervising social worker) to seek their opinions about the child's reaction during previous interactions with their parent. Social work records that include comments about earlier direct contact sessions between the child and their natural parents are also very useful.

Criterion 2: The natural parent should have a positive view of direct contact

A psychologist may assess this in a number of ways, initially by interviewing the natural parent about their attitude towards direct contact post-adoption. Of course, the natural parent may speak positively about direct contact post-adoption during this interview (for example, by stating they value it highly, by confirming that they think it will enhance their relationship with their natural child, by claiming they will attend regularly), yet feel and behave differently after the adoption is granted. That's why it is important to look at other sources of information, especially the natural parent's behaviour with regard to previous contact sessions (for example, they attended all previous scheduled contact sessions, they were punctual on arrival and departure, they did not complain to their child about the practical difficulties of direct contact). Comments from other professionals who have seen the natural parents during contact sessions can shed additional light on their attitude.

Criterion 3: The natural parent should not use direct contact to undermine the adoption

A psychologist may assess this in a number of ways, usually by interviewing with the natural parent, who may assert categorically that they will not use post-adoption direct contact arrangements to undermine the adoption placement itself, but yet still do so once direct contact

post-adoption is agreed (for example, by making negative comments about the adopters during a contact session, by urging the child to return to them, by spoiling the child during contact sessions, by encouraging the child to have split loyalties). At the time of the interview, they may be sincere in their claim that they will only use direct contact positively, and yet change their minds once the reality of contact unfolds.

Another useful source of evidence for assessing this criterion, therefore, is the natural parent's behaviour during previous direct contact sessions with their child (for example, they did not try to disrupt their child's relationship with the prospective adopters by making negative remarks about them, they did not suggest the child should love them more than the prospective adopters, they did not buy their child toys which the adopters had specifically asked them not to). Observations from other professionals who have seen the natural parent talk about the adoptive parents during contact sessions can also be informative.

Criterion 4: There should be an existing secure attachment between the natural parents and their child

A secure attachment with a parent is vital to a child's healthy psychological development, as it promotes their emotional wellbeing, helps the infant form relationships with others as they grow, and builds their resilience, independence, empathy and self-esteem; and the main features of the parent-child interaction usually present when there is a secure attachment include that the child stays in reasonably close proximity to the parent, the child resists separation from their parent, the parent is sensitive to their child's emotional signals, the child is able to be soothed by the parent when upset, the parent talks and plays with their child in a natural way, and there is good communication when the parent sets limits for the child(40).

A psychologist will typically assess the presence or absence of secure attachment behaviour using first-hand observation of direct contact between the non-custodial natural parent and their child. However, the presence of such behaviour does not necessarily mean there is a secure attachment (for instance, a child might smile as if happy yet feel thoroughly miserable), nor does the absence of such behaviour mean there is not a secure attachment (for example, a child might not smile yet feel extremely happy). Therefore, observations of interactions between a natural parent and their child are best viewed alongside other evidence such as background reports, self-report by the natural parent and by the child if possible, and perspectives from other professionals who have observed the parent and child interact previously.

Triseliotis (2011)(41) noted that "with some adaptations to take account of subsequent studies, a number of practitioners continue to use broadly similar criteria" (p11). Therefore, it is reasonable

to assume that they can still be regarded a valid basis for decision making. However, a fifth criterion now appears to have emerged from research, namely:

Criterion 5: The adoptive parents should have a positive view of direct contact post-adoption

When the adoptive parents are “communicatively open” (that is, they are willing to promote communication about adoption within and beyond their family(42)), direct contact after adoption is more likely to be a positive experience for the child(43). Conversely, when adoptive parents do not have an open and positive attitude towards direct contact post-adoption, the commitment to maintaining direct contact is more likely to diminish(44).

Many adoptive parents are concerned that the child’s direct contact with their natural parent could stop the child settling into their new family, could confuse the child, and may even expose the child to further harm and abuse from the natural parent(45). It is hardly surprising that some adoptive parents may be at best cautious, and at worst hostile, to direct contact post-adoption. Adoption agencies and local authorities have a major role in helping prospective adoptive parents develop a positive attitude towards direct contact(46). A psychologist as expert witness will typically interview the adoptive parents to ascertain the nature of their views towards direct contact, their likely resistance to change, and the extent to which they have fully explored the implications of different contact options.

Given this wide range of factors that can influence the outcome of post-adoption direct contact, making a psychological recommendation in these cases is neither a straightforward task nor an exact science. This is an extremely challenging area of work(47); it can involve a conflict of interest between the different parties involved in the adoption and often raises ethical dilemmas(48). Different psychologists can examine the same dataset, the same evidence, and the same concepts and yet still come to different conclusions(49). Nevertheless, when a psychologist as expert witness studies the available research in detail and also uses the above five criteria when considering the suitability of direct contact between a natural parent and their child after adoption, their subsequent professional recommendation is more likely to be robust.

Conclusion

When post-adoption contact is contested in court, there are three potential choices to consider, namely, no contact, indirect contact and direct contact, although in practice the choice is typically between the latter two options. There are key psychological criteria for deciding which arrangement is best suited to an individual child, and there are ways that these key psychological

criteria can be properly and effectively assessed in order to make a reliable recommendation about post-adoption contact to the court.

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