"From a 'happy ending' to a 'lifelong journey': the growing understanding of the support needs of people affected by adoption"

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I'm delighted to be able to speak at today's launch event, and my topic is about post adoption support for people affected by adoption. I want to talk about where we have come from, where we are now, and where I think we should be going in the future.

Early understandings of the lifelong impact of adoption

Even as early as 1980, we were starting to understand the impact of adoption on the adopted person's life long journey. The work of John Triseliotis in his book "In search of origins" (1973) illuminated the identity issues, social stigma, and feelings of loss and rejection faced by some adoptees, and recognised that although disconnected physically and legally from their birth family, the adopted person did not necessarily disconnect psychologically. As my talk progresses, I will argue that the contemporary adoption system still needs to focus on meeting adopted people's identity needs.

The support needs of children adopted from care

Where have we got to? A key change over the last 40 years is the growing and now predominant use of adoption for children in care. We have learned that adoption offers great opportunities for children to leave care and be permanent and loved member part of their adoptive family. But although adoption provides a secure family base for most, many children and young people will have ongoing developmental needs and issues for which they desperately need support – services for children, services for families, and services just for parents. This is now widely recognised by professionals, and supporting prospective adoptive parents to understand children's likely future needs is a key area of work in adoption recruitment teams. This is vital as research shows that adoptive parents who feel well prepared and well informed, and who have had the chance to really consider in depth the challenges that may lie ahead, can weather future storms much better (Neil, Young & Hartley, 2018).

In terms of how we support children in their adoptive families, we can learn from the suggestions of adoptive parents gathered through research (Neil et al, 2018).

- Parents have argued that that their child's problems must be taken seriously and responded to with empathy.

- They want support "without being made to feel as if they have failed that child".

- Families need access to specialist services where professionals are experienced in managing the problems that *adopted* children have. The support that adopted children need is multidisciplinary, as mental health problems, developmental disorders, disabilities, and educational special needs are all common for children adopted from care. So an important

future development for adoption support services, and I know this is work that is already developed or in progress in some areas, is to build teams where social workers can work together with colleagues in health and education.

- I would add to these suggestions that there is a need to respond to children's assessed needs, rather than provide what services are available locally. Although attachment difficulties are common amongst adopted children, we also need to recognise other developmental difficulties such as FASD, ADHD and ASD (Woolgar & Baldock, 2015).

- Helping children with peer relationships is also another area for the future that I would highlight – please let us know in the chat if you are working on this!

As well as services focused on children and their needs, adoptive parents may need direct support, as parenting children with special needs brings challenges as well as joys. In my research adoptive parents have particularly valued peer support, and adoptive parent buddy and mentoring schemes are an important area of development (Neil et al, 2018).

With our now more sophisticated understanding of the developmental issues faced by adoptive children, the challenge for postadoption support services is to be proactive as well as reactive, anticipating the support needs of families and intervening early to prevent problems arising or worsening. In a paper published earlier this year, we argued that risk factors known to exist at the time children are being placed for adoption should be used proactively to plan the support that children may need in the future (Neil, Morciano, Young & Hartley, 2000). We also need to reduce preventable risks – delay, moves in care, and stressful and difficult transitions from foster care to adoption. In terms of transitions into adoptive families, this is an example of where the positives that adoption brings need always to be looked at in the context of the loss they experience, especially the loss of existing relationships with foster and birth family members (Neil & Beek, 2020). I have been lucky to collaborate with Mary Beek and Gillian Schofield in developing practice resources around moving to adoption – now available online (https://www.movingtoadoption.co.uk/).

Supporting adopted children's relationships and identities

Returning now to those adoption specific issues identified over 40 years ago by John Triseliotis, many families will need help with adoption related issues, such as talking to children about their background, their feelings about adoption, managing birth family contact, life story work, managing the challenges of social media, or planning a reunion with birth relatives. We need to pay special attention to the identity needs of black and ethnic minority children in transracial placements, helping parents develop cultural competence, helping young people connect with positive role models, birth family members, peers.

In my longitudinal study of children adopted in the late 1990s, it was apparent that most adopted young people often had their birth families in their hearts and minds, and almost all supported the view that adopted children should have the opportunity of contact with birth relatives (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2015). Young people who had sustained contact with birth family members over the years saw it as a visible sign of the openness of their adoptive parents. They valued the opportunity to have a relationship with people in their birth family, particularly with grandparents and siblings. Many young people felt that seeing or hearing from their birth family had helped them to understand who they were, where they came from and why they were adopted. They valued their

adoptive parents being open with them about their past, and not being defensive about their connections to their birth family (Neil et al, 2015).

Key stages in the child's development may trigger questions and feelings about their adoption, such as age 7 to 9 in middle childhood where comprehension of adoption grows, the teenage years when identity questions come to the fore, and transitions to adulthood where young people re expected to exercise more of their own agency in deciding about by family connections (Brodzinsky, 2011, Neil et al, 2015). These are all important times to reach out to adoptive parents and adopted young people to see if they need further help.

Most complaints by young people about the level of openness in their adoption tend to be about contact plans that had fallen by the wayside, suggesting we need to focus on supporting , sustaining and reviewing children's connection with their birth family after the adoption order (https://www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/briefs/DFE-RBX-10-04.pdf ; Neil et al, 2015). This requires both practical and emotional support, and a need to think about contact in terms of the underpinning relationships. The quality of children's relationships with birth family members is important to consider in planning and supporting contact. The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory recently published key principles which are really helpful in this area of work (Ryan, 2020).

Although research has identified a range of benefits related to face-to-face contact after adoption, this type of contact remains highly unusual with birth parents. Letterbox contact remains the standard plan, but birth parents and adoptive parents often didn't know what to write in letters, and often one or both sides stop replying. Loss of sibling relationships is also widespread- my research suggests half of children who had siblings outside of their adoptive family are not in touch with any of them. We also need to do more to think about children's connections with their birth fathers, and this side of their birth family as this was a gap that many adopted young people in my own research have pointed out. This paints a rather stark picture-that it's too simplistic to think that 40 years ago adoptions were closed, and now they are open (Neil, 2018).

Adopted children have very different contact plans that children in care and kinship care. Yet adopted children tend to enter care for the same reasons as children in foster care in kinship care-siblings are often cared for across these three settings. We need to ask ourselves questions about why adopted children's needs regarding birth family connections are looked at in such a different way to other groups of children. We need to focus on an adoption system that respects children's identities and relationships (Neil & Beek, 2020).

Learning about birth family contact during 'lockdown'

Some really positive examples of practice and learning for the future have emerged from our study of contact in lockdown (Neil, Copson & Sorensen, 2020). Some adoption agencies had recognised the heightened need of birth parents for reassurance about their children, and had encouraged or enabled adoptive parents to get in touch with a reassuring letter. Some adoptive parents had themselves reached out to birth parents, and in one or two cases this had created a real breakthrough with birth mums who had never written back, being moved by this positive action to finally feel able to do so. Digital methods of contact provided more opportunities for foster carers and adopters to build relationships with birth parents, and practitioners told us they planned to focus on this relationship building in the future.

The usefulness of video calling for helping children stay in touch with their families was highlighted. This seemed particularly positive for older children and teenagers, who appreciated the flexibility,

informality and familiarity of the format. Respondents also discussed the practical advantages of virtual contact - allowing for a greater frequency of meeting, and no travel time, or lost time due to "no shows". The overall conclusion from this study is that virtual contact, whilst it should not replace direct contact, is a useful option for children that should be considered beyond the pandemic.

I think this is definitely an area where we need to continue to explore the possibilities in adoption. I think there is a growing recognition that "letterbox" is a difficult form of contact to get right, and in some ways is an antiquated form of communication. We need to think about and explore the possibility of using digital technology to enable adopted children to keep in touch with their birth families.

Supporting birth relatives

Over the past 40 years we have learned that losing a child to adoption has a life-changing impact on birth family members. From the 1990s onwards research with birth mothers whose children were adopted in the post-war adoption boom, showed that they did not forget their babies, and often could not resolve their feelings of loss. Research such as the study "Half a million women" (Howe, Hinings, Sawbridge, 1992) revealed the stigma, trauma, guilt, shame and grief that mothers had borne for years and years. Working with birth parents (fathers and mothers) whose children were placed for adoption many years ago is still a vitally important role that post adoption agencies must play. This area of work is not going to go away. Many children (and their birth parents) adopted in more recent years will not have had a working contact plan, and will have unmet identity needs and unresolved losses similar to 40 years ago.

Thinking about the support needs of contemporary birth relatives in adoption. The first point I would emphasise is my use of the term "birth relatives" as opposed to "birth mothers", as the loss of a child to adoption can affect the whole of the birth family and services need to be accessible to all.

The research by Karen Broadhurst and her colleagues has highlighted something we all know happens in practice: the repeat removals of children from birth mothers (and fathers), something that particularly affects young parents and care-experienced people (Broadhurst et al, 2015). So for birth parent support services we need services that not just help parents come to terms with the loss of their child, but also work on the problems that led to this, make realistic plans about having future children, and find a way of rebuilding a sense of meaning and purpose in their life (Neil, Cossar, Lorgelly & Young, 2010). We need to continue to think about adoption as part of the wider child welfare system – family support and child protection services to keep children safe at their most vulnerable age, and ideally to enable children to stay with their birth families (Neil et al, 2020).

When offering support to the birth relatives of adopted children, we have to recognise the adversarial nature of the adoption process from the point of view of parents. Parents have the right, enshrined in law, to be treated "fairly openly and with respect" throughout the legal process. Parents often react to the impending loss of their child often with anger, substance misuse, withdrawal or mental collapse, such that professionals and parents each perceive the other to be "hard to reach". There is still an urgent need to try and stand alongside birth relatives through the process of adoption offering understanding, advice and information, and emotional and practical support and preventing these negative spirals of interaction from occurring (Neil et al, 2010)**.** With the move towards regional adoption agencies, there are opportunities here to improve services for birth parents through either in-house provision or commissioning with the independent sector. One thing I would really love to see every adoption agency do is signpost birth parents, from the front page of their website, to support services in their area.

Supporting adopted adults.

The final area of adoption support I want to talk about is back to where I started -adopted adults. I'm working with colleagues on research project with adopted adults who are now parents (https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families/our-research/child-placement/from-being-adopted-to-becoming-a-parent). It's not easy to find adopted adults to take part in research projects. There isn't one central organisation dedicated to bringing together or supporting adopted adults, though some smaller more localised groups exist. Perhaps this suggests an area where we need to focus more in the future?

In our interviews with adopted adults, we are looking at how they tell the story of their life as an adopted person and a parent. We hope to begin reporting our findings early next year, but in the meantime I can give you a brief flavour of what we are hearing.

- For some people, being adopted is largely a positive story, sometimes not the main theme in their life narrative.

- For others their life story is about 'overcoming the odds'. Despite many difficulties and challenges adoptees feel they are managing in life and as a parent and that overcoming challenges has made them a stronger person. For some, ongoing therapy throughout childhood and an loving and open relationship with adoptive parents was key.

- Other adoptees describe their life in terms of 'ongoing struggles' – issues from their past and unresolved losses are still affecting them in the present, including impacting on their parenting.

- Finally, and sadly, for some adopted people the dominant theme in their life story is about being 'robbed of parenthood'. Being adopted had not been the hoped for positive turning point. Lacking professional support to overcome early adversities, and struggling in their adoptive family, many found themselves in a similar situation to their own birth parents when they became a mum or dad and their children were lost to care or adoption.

Three clear messages emerge from this research.

Firstly, adoption per se is not enough. We must continue to focus on the quality of adoptive family life, and the provision of well-matched and effective support services to enable children to overcome loss and adversity before they reach adulthood.

Secondly, that becoming a parent often reawakens issues related to adoption, and this is a time when some adopted people may need extra help or reassurance. But there is a fear on the part of adopted people, and in some cases this was borne out in their experience, that negative assumptions of their ability to parent may be held by professionals.

Thirdly, adopted people do continue to rework and rewrite their life stories well into midlife - and some will need support in this process-so a focus on supporting not just adopted children but adopted adults is needed.

The final point on which I would like to finish is that we also need to think not just about the adopted children and adults, adoptive parents, and birth family members, as people who need our support. We need to recognise that we need *their* support. Our provision of adoption support

services, and our research with people affected by adoption, will be improved if we can draw on people's lived experiences and use their strengths and resources in planning and delivering services (Cossar & Neil, 2015).

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