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Chatting Online With My Other Mother: Post-Adoption Contact in the Facebook Era

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Openness in adoption traditionally involves a variety of practices for adoptive parents, including communicating with their child about their adoption and often maintaining post-adoption contact with their child's birth family. Indirect and direct contact is supported and mediated by practitioners due to the complex and sensitive nature of relationships following the adoption of children from public care in the UK. The growth in the use of communicative technologies by children has made it possible for adopted children and birth relatives to search and contact one another online on sites such as Facebook without professional support. This practice has been called virtual contact. Research and guidance is currently lacking on the experiences of virtual contact and the best ways to respond to ensure adopted children and young people are protected from risk and harm. This briefing outlines a study focusing on the influence of communicative technologies on post-adoption contact and other open practices in adoptive families. The research involved an online survey of adoptive parents and interviews with adoptive parents and adopted young people.

The growth in the use of communicative technologies, such as Facebook, is changing the way in which openness is practised and defined within adoptive families.

In the past two to three decades adoption practice has shifted its focus from the 'clean break' approach of breaking biological and forming adoptive relationships to an ideology of openness (Howe & Feast, 2000). Adoption involves a range of additional tasks outside the realms of 'normal' family life. Adoptive parents must manage the additional needs of the adopted child, due to complex or traumatic birth family histories (Neil, 2003), the need to talk openly with their child about their adoption (Brodzinsky, 2005) and many adoptions now include a form of contact with the child's birth family (Parker, 1999). The emergence of technology adds a further dimension to these complex tasks of openness (Adams, 2012).

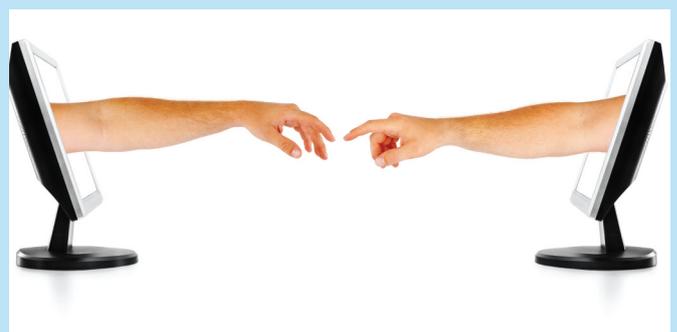
'Virtual contact' encompasses a range of post-adoption contact activities including communication through social networking sites between adopted children and birth relatives. Technology can also facilitate a range of other adoption-related activities online, including searching for birth relatives and information, providing online communities of support for members of the adoption triad (adoptive parents, adoptees and birth relatives) and allowing individuals to watch one another on social networking sites without making contact (Whitesel & Howard, 2013). Adoptive and birth family members use technology to fulfil needs of information, communication or reunification (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013).

Research and practice guidance is currently lacking, however some knowledge has emerged. Practice literature has been produced in the UK as an effort to respond to the use of technology in adoptive family life, whilst policy guidance is still lacking. Certain risks have been identified including; the immediate and unmediated nature of virtual contact (Fursland, 2010); the vulnerabilities of adopted

children; and, the lack of control adoptive parents have over the contact arrangements (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013). However, several authors refer to the opportunity for the use of technology to enhance communication, openness and trust, not just as a method of contact with birth relatives, but also between adoptive parents and their children (Fursland, 2010; Morrison, 2012; Hammond & Cooper, 2013).

The findings suggest that adoption is experiencing a transition from the sole use of traditional open practices to the incorporation of technological practices in adoptive family life. These practices include; using technological conversations in the tasks of communicative openness, adoptive parents and adoptee searching online for information and birth relatives, and the practice of virtual contact by a minority of families. This suggests a need to reconceptualise what is meant by 'openness' in adoption today to incorporate these emerging technological practices.

The experiences of technology in adoptive families point to a complex interplay of risk and opportunity. Therefore, practice must respond to ensure families are supported to utilise technological practices where appropriate in a way which safeguards the wellbeing of those involved. Adoptive families should be prepared about the ways in which technology is changing the tasks of openness, and how these can be managed effectively and safely.



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Background

Post-adoption contact is now a common feature of domestic adoption within the UK. To date, this has been conceptualised as direct (face-to-face) and indirect (letterbox) contact or as mediated contact. However, a new form of contact has emerged that challenges these categories conceptualised as 'virtual contact'. The term encompasses a range of post-adoption contact activities including communication through social networking sites between adopted children and birth relatives.

The study

This study aimed to understand how technology may be changing the way in which openness is practised in adoptive families. The research questions were as follows:

1. How is openness practised in adoptive families today?
2. What relationship and/or stress factors influence the experience of openness?
3. What opinions do adoptive parents have of the emerging practice of virtual contact?
4. How common is virtual contact and how is it experienced?
5. Does adoption practice need to change to respond to the impact of technology?

A mixed methods approach was used including an online survey of 106 adoptive parents (mean child age 8.75 years) and interviews with 21 families including 23 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people (aged 14-22).

Findings

Findings Survey

75.5% of adoptive families had contact arrangements in place. The most common type of contact used was letterbox (92.4%) with direct contact maintained by 40.5%. The child's age at placement influenced whether contact was in place; 61.9% of those placed under the age of 1 had contact; 72.4% of those placed 1-4 years; and 92.6% of those placed aged 5-9 years. The majority of parents reported talking to their child(ren) on a regular basis about adoption (81%).

The majority of all parents were worried about virtual contact (78%) and a large proportion had searched online themselves for their child's birth relatives (61%). The survey showed that 11 families had experienced virtual contact, and in 7 families the contact was wanted and expected. In 5 cases virtual contact was initiated from a child to a birth family member and in 7 families virtual contact was still on-going.

The majority of cases involved the birth mother (6) or siblings (5). Survey data also suggested that the tasks of adoptive parenting are changing due to the use of communicative technologies as virtual contact increased parenting stress, requires adopters to understand their child's technology use and be competent online themselves.

When considering adopted young people over the age of 13 years, 30% had experienced virtual contact. Adoptive parents who had experienced virtual contact were generally dissatisfied with support services. Certain predictive factors have been identified that, with further research, could help to target support services to those families who may be most 'at risk' of experiencing virtual contact. Common factors associated with the occurrence of virtual contact include; direct contact, child aged over 13 years, older age at placement, and a child's regular use of sites such as Facebook.

However, virtual contact also presented opportunities, as most families seemed to manage virtual contact themselves. In particular, most adoptees were reported to be happy to be in contact with birth relatives and were supported or given the freedom to continue the contact. The high levels of parents searching online suggest that families are taking information needs into their own hands. The contact and information needs of families may need to be reviewed regularly, particularly as children reach teenage years given that adoptive parents were more likely to search if they were dissatisfied with current contact arrangements.

Findings Interviews

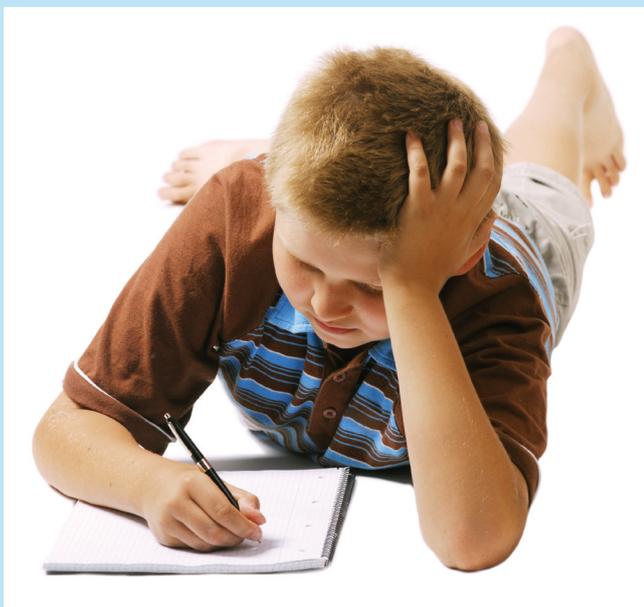
Adoptive parents and adopted young people were asked questions surrounding traditional open practices (an adopted child's dual connection to two families, communicative openness, and contact arrangements) and technological open practices (the use of technology in the family, experiences and opinions of virtual contact, and changing support needs).

■ Traditional open practices

All adoptive parents acknowledged the adoptee's dual connection to their adoptive and birth families. Some adoptive parents and adoptees acknowledged the dual connection as a central part of their family life and identity. However, some adoptees experienced split loyalties between their adoptive and birth families. Some adoptive parents also struggled with the ongoing presence of birth family members in their life.

Although many parents often discussed the normality of adoption-related conversations, adoptees were more reluctant to talk about their adoption. Adoptees described that their adoption conversations focused on questions and information needs, rather than an everyday topic of conversation as suggested by their parents. Adoption conversations may also need to adapt and change to suit the needs of the adoptee, with reference to age, child understanding and adolescence and identity needs.

The motivations for maintaining post-adoption contact differed between adoptive parents and their adopted children. Adopters maintained and facilitated contact due to empathy for their child and/or the birth relatives. However, some also felt obliged due to agency agreements or the need to maintain contact through fear of blame for lost connections by their child in the future. Adoptees focussed on their dual connection in terms of maintaining birth family relationships, building their identity and answering questions.



The survey suggested higher levels of satisfaction with direct rather than indirect contact. Interview accounts did reveal certain elements of satisfaction with direct contact, including providing reassurance for adoptees, maintaining relationships, and, positive adult relationships. However, challenges were also discussed, including problematic behaviour displayed by birth relatives and the risk posed due to their involvement in a child's pathway to care. Indirect contact was thought to be problematic in certain ways such as the unreliability of birth relatives and formality of arrangements. However, it was also beneficial and some adoptive parents and adoptees treasured letters and enjoyed the personal nature of this contact. Certain influencing factors that affected the success of traditional contact methods emerged: the judgement of birth relatives and adult relationships, the significance of relationships to the child, the formal nature of contact, and the risks involved.

In some cases, there seems to be limits to the extent of these traditional practices for meeting the identity needs of adopted adolescents. Therefore, there were suggestions that technological practices - virtual contact, parent online searching and information searching and sharing online - are emerging to supplement and extend traditional openness.

■ Technological open practices

Adoptive parents' views about virtual contact focussed on risks, such as the immediacy of the contact and lack of support, the risk posed by the birth relative and any negative information found online. However they were also able to identify potential benefits, including addressing identity needs and questions of adoptees, and giving opportunities to prepare for further contact at a safe distance.

The practice of adoptive parents searching online fulfilled the aims of preparation, monitoring birth relatives and information finding with one adoptive parent stating "*forewarned is forearmed*". Once parents had searched, some shared the information they had found with their child, some continued to monitor birth relatives and others blocked birth relatives on their child's social media account.

The majority of cases where virtual contact had occurred were viewed negatively by adoptive parents (seven out of eleven families), with two being mixed and two positive. Risk included an unmediated nature of the contact, a negative impact on the child due to them not being emotionally ready to deal with contact and inappropriate behaviour from birth relatives such as lying and sharing new information.

"Facebook has exposed all these children to their birth families at the worst possible time, really, in their lives when, you know, they're such vulnerable adolescents anyway" (adoptive parent)

However, virtual contact had benefits for some families, such as providing normality and reality to a child's dual connection to two families, and extending existing relationships with birth relatives. For adopted young people, they enjoyed the convenience, could ask questions and enjoyed contact with certain birth relatives, often siblings:

"I think if I wasn't in touch with them [siblings], I think there'd be a lot more questions I'd be asking my birth parents. But with them, it sort of explains quite a lot"
(adoptee, aged 15)

Adoptive families were often able to manage virtual contact themselves in the following ways: the adoptee managing contact independently, the adoptive parent being included on online networks, adult communication and relationships, continuing open conversations between adopters and their children, and in negative cases, the adopters blocking birth relatives or contacting birth relatives directly to ask them to stop. Some families (36%) did receive support from their adoption agency which often resulted in social workers talking to the birth relatives involved to explain why virtual contact was inappropriate.

Adoptive parent support had shifted from actively controlling contact through indirect and direct methods, to supporting their children to continue contact online

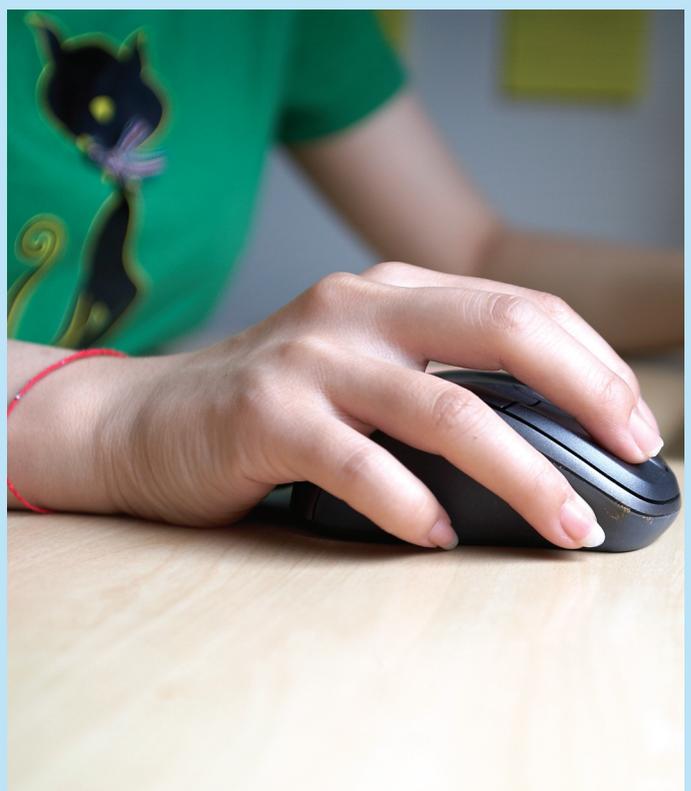
themselves or through maintaining open conversations with them. This had positive consequences in the form of more family-like and regular contact, or negative consequences through direct access between birth relatives and adoptees when risks were involved.

■ **Support needs**

Adoptive parents highlighted the importance of preparation and training of adopters about the ways in which technology is changing openness in adoption. In particular, adopters would value peer support and hearing case studies from families who have experienced virtual contact and how they have managed it, in both positive and negative ways. Adoptees would also tell younger children not to rush into reunions online and ensure they have adult support. Adoptive parents who had experienced virtual contact also identified a lack of support, with only 36% reporting satisfaction with the support they received suggesting a need to improve responses to virtual contact and train social workers effectively. Virtual contact was identified as something that must be considered at the start of placement, incorporating the management of it into contact plans and considering carefully what identifying information is shared. Families who adopted over the last ten to fifteen years need to be revisited and ongoing support offered.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest that adoption is experiencing a transition from the sole use of traditional open practices to the incorporation of technological practices. There is no suggestion that technological open practices are replacing traditional ones, but rather they exist and relate to one another at the same time. For example, there is a link between direct and virtual contact methods in this sample. Therefore, it seems necessary that the term 'openness' be redefined to include these technological changes and acknowledge the potential additional open tasks for adoptive families. The recognition that virtual contact, in the same way as traditional methods of contact, is not suitable for all families and children but can work well for some allows practice to respond effectively and support those families who are most vulnerable to the risks involved. Therefore it cannot be assumed that virtual contact is necessarily a positive or negative development. It would be more useful to ask questions such as; what are the risks involved for each family and child? Can virtual contact be a positive addition to contact for a particular child? Do the family possess sufficient resilience to manage virtual contact?





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