"Add as Friend?": Adaptive Parents’ Expectations and Feelings Concerning Contact with Birth Family via Technology

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Abstract

Advances in technology (e.g., the Internet, social media) have led to substantial changes in the ways that adoptive and birth family members communicate. Such advances allow for an increasing level of openness through access to individuals’ personal information – even in spite of barriers established by the adopting agency (e.g., adoption website). However, these changes sometimes focus on barriers rather than on opportunities. The purpose of this study was to examine adoptive and birth family members’ levels of contact and the reasons they used technology to communicate. Findings indicate that many families were already connected via social media, email, and texting. Regardless of the current level of contact (active versus no contact), most parents felt positively or ambitiously about future connections via technology with birth families. Professionals working with adoptive families should aim to help them navigate their relationships, set appropriate boundaries, and help them manage realistic expectations for future contact.

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, adoptions have become increasingly open as the benefits of open adoption for birth families, adopted children, and their parents have become increasingly clear (Mulli & March, 2005). Research has primarily focused on open adoption arrangements and changes in such arrangements over time (Craig & Barth, 2009), as well as challenges in maintaining relationships between birth and adoptive families (Siegel, 2008). Advances in technology (e.g., the Internet, telephone texting) have shifted interpersonal communication between adoptive and birth family members. Such advances are leading to an increasing level of openness through access to individuals’ personal information – even in spite of barriers established by the adopting agency (e.g., adoption website). Furthermore, those agreements for post-adoption contact have a sense of being an essential part of being a family to birth family members (Paithan & Maldon, 2012), which implies a complex set of relationships. This study examined how adoptee parents support openness in relationships with birth family members. It will face challenges in navigating boundaries and contact (Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Dowling, 2011). Siegel (2011) notes that while parents may feel excited, curious, or hopeful about their child’s contact with their birth parents, or feel anxious, uncertain, or insecure, and may also feel frustrated, angry, or unloved.

Research Questions

Little research to date has focused on how adoptive parents feel about current and future contact with birth families via technology. The current study addresses the following research questions:

1. What level of contact does parents have with their birth family via technology (e.g., texting, email, social media)?
2. How do parents feel about current and future contact with birth family members? How does the level of current contact via technology relate to parents’ emotions about future contact?

Method

Participants

Data from 77 individuals (28 women in 14 lesbian couples; 22 men in 11 gay male couples; 12 women and 12 men in 12 heterosexual couples and 5 single women who worked as volunteers for other purposes). The sample was derived from a larger longitudinal study focused on the transition to parenthood among couples who had contacted their birth family five years after the birth of their child. 21.3% of heterosexual parents, 23.4% of lesbian parents, and 15.0% of gay parents focused on the level and nature of contact of adoptive families level (active versus no contact). The participants felt positive or ambitiously about future connections with birth family members via technology. Findings indicate that many families were already connected via social media, email, and texting. Regardless of the current level of contact (active versus no contact), most parents felt positively or ambitiously about future connections with birth family members via technology. Professionals working with adoptive families should aim to help them navigate their relationships, set appropriate boundaries, and help them manage realistic expectations for future contact.

Types of Contact

Types of contact described by participants are included in Table 1: a breakdown to family type and gender. Our findings indicate that most parents were already in contact (e.g., Facebook, tweets, emails, exchanges, texting) with birth parents.

Types of Contact (active versus no contact).

Table 1: Type of Contact via Technology, by Family Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Type</th>
<th>Type of Contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Active: Facebook, texts, emails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Active: Facebook, texts, emails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Active: Facebook, texts, emails</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Results

Types of Contact

Types of contact described by participants are included in Table 1: a breakdown to family type and gender. Our findings indicate that most parents were already in contact (e.g., Facebook, texts, emails, exchanges, texting) with birth parents.

Results

Table 1: Demographics and Contact with Birth Family, by Family Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Type</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40-59</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Discussion

This study was funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation to the third author.

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Conclusion

Many families are already in contact with their birth child via technology, particularly over online social media sites such as Facebook. Most parents feel positively or ambitiously about using technology in the future for communication with birth family members. Professionals working with adoptive families should help them manage these relationships, set boundaries when necessary, and to help families have realistic expectations for future contact via technology with their child’s birth family.