

2008

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Grotevant, Harold D.; Wrobel, Gretchen Miller; Von Korff, Lynn; Skinner, Brooke; Newell, Jane; Friese, Sarah; and McRoy, Ruth G., "Many Faces of Openness in Adoption: Perspectives of Adopted Adolescents and Their Parents" (2008). *Adoption Quarterly*. 4.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10926750802163204>

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Published in final edited form as:

Adopt Q. 2008 July 1; 10(3 & 4): 79–101. doi:10.1080/10926750802163204.

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Abstract

Parents and adolescents (mean age, 15.7 years) from 177 adoptive families participating in the second wave of the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project were interviewed about their post-adoption contact arrangements. The sample included families with no contact, stopped contact, contact without meetings, and contact with face-to-face meetings between the adolescent and birth mother. Openness arrangements were dynamic, and different openness arrangements were associated with different experiences and feelings. Adoptive families with contact reported having higher levels of satisfaction about their openness arrangements, experiencing more positive feelings about the birth mother, and possessing more factual and personal knowledge about the birth mother than did families without contact. Adolescents and adoptive mothers in the contact with meetings group reported the greatest satisfaction with their openness arrangements; those with no contact or stopped contact reported the least satisfaction with their arrangements. Participants having no contact were more likely to want the intensity of contact to increase in the future rather than stay the same. Many participants already having contact wanted it to increase in the future. Fewer than 1 percent of all participants wanted to see the intensity of contact decrease.

Keywords

Adoption; openness in adoption; adopted adolescents; birth parent contact; satisfaction; adoptive kinship network; Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some adoption agencies in the United States began to offer opportunities that permitted contact between adoptive and birth families following the placement (Carp, 1998; Melosh, 2002). Contact could involve the sharing of information, gifts, letters, phone calls, e-mails, or personal visits; it could also vary in frequency, in duration, in who initiates, and in whether identifying information is shared in the course of contact (McRoy, Grotevant, Ayers-Lopez, & Henney, 2007; Neil & Howe, 2004b). The acceptance of these practices led some agencies to offer and even encourage face-to-face contact between members of the adoptive and birth family at placement and afterward (McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988). The practices that were novel in the early 1980s have now become commonplace in U.S. adoption practice (Henney, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2003; Henney, Onken, McRoy, & Grotevant, 1998).

Nevertheless, open adoption continues to be “one of the most controversial changes in the adoption field over the past few decades” (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002, p. 303). There are several reasons that this is so. Even in the voluntary placement of infants, some people have concerns about birth mothers’ wishes for privacy (e.g., Hunsaker, 2001). In adoptions following abuse or neglect, there are questions about how to help the child maintain connections with the family of origin while simultaneously providing safety and protection (Howe & Steele, 2004). In international adoptions, where contact was once considered impossible, more adoptive families are seeking contact and more agencies in the countries of origin are promoting it (Kim, 2006). Adults who were adopted as children from other countries are speaking out against being cut off from their families and cultures of origin (Lo, 2006). Despite these controversies, disconnects continue to exist between policy and practice and the research evidence that could inform them (Quinton & Selwyn, 2006).

The Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP) was launched in the mid-1980s to understand the character and consequences of differing arrangements regarding contact within the adoptive kinship network after placement (hereafter called openness arrangements). The adoptive kinship network conceptualizes the child at the center of a family system that includes his or her adoptive parents, siblings, and extended family as well as his or her birth parents, siblings, and extended family, whether the individuals are known to one another or not (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Contact refers to any type of communication between members of the adoptive and birth families after placement, such as the exchange of cards, letters, pictures, gifts, e-mails, phone calls, or face-to-face visits. Contact may occur directly between adoptive and birth family members or may be mediated by a third party who serves as a go-between. Contact may or may not involve the sharing of identifying information such as names and addresses. Higher intensity of contact refers to more personal information shared, more people included in contact, and/or greater frequency of contact. Openness refers to a spectrum of arrangements varying in intensity and type of contact and ranging from confidential adoptions, in which there is no contact or identifying information shared, to fully disclosed adoptions, in which adoptive and birth family members have identifying information about one another and may contact each another directly as they wish.

MTARP has followed 190 adoptive families and 169 birth mothers whose arrangements range from no contact whatsoever to contact mediated by adoption agency staff without the sharing of identifying information to fully disclosed adoption with regular ongoing face-to-face contact. The sampling plan for this project was designed to focus on variations in openness arrangements. All adoptions involved infants voluntarily placed by their birth parents into two-parent families by private adoption agencies¹ in the United States. The sample excluded special needs, transracial, and international placements because of the complications these arrangements would introduce into the study’s design.

Other studies about openness in adoption have addressed outcomes for participants such as psychological adjustment of children (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006; Neil, 2007; Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006), grief resolution of birth mothers (Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2007), and adoptive parents' sense of entitlement to their child (e.g., Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994). Those that address participants' experiences with one another and feelings about those experiences tend to be qualitative and/or based on very small samples (e.g., Logan & Smith, 2005; Siegel, 1993; Silverstein & Demick, 1994). The present study uses a large sample (177 adoptive kinship networks) to examine experiences and feelings about contact. Quantitative data of this scope are needed to complement the growing number of first-person accounts (e.g., Dischler, 2006; Duxbury, 2007), small qualitative studies (e.g., Siegel, 1993), and advocacy books (e.g., Melina & Roszia, 1993) that are guiding adoption practice.

Detailed information about MTARP openness arrangements at wave 1, when the children were in the middle-childhood years, was presented by Grotevant and McRoy (1998). The present paper focuses specifically on the openness arrangements encountered during the wave 2 follow-up, which occurred when the target children were adolescents. Unlike prior reports that have focused on family processes and developmental outcomes,² the current paper focuses directly on the openness arrangements and participants' feelings about them. The perspectives of adolescents and their adoptive parents were used to address three questions. (1) What were the openness arrangements experienced by MTARP families when the children were adolescents? In this section, we describe for the first time the diverse openness arrangements experienced by participants, including adolescents' knowledge about birth relatives, frequency and type of contact, feelings about birth parents and about meetings, and the role of birth relatives in adoptive families' lives. (2) How satisfied were adoptive parents and adolescents with their openness arrangements? (3) What did adoptive parents and adolescents wish in terms of future contact?

METHODS

Participants

Adoptive families and birth mothers were recruited through 35 adoption agencies in 23 states representing all regions of the United States. Recruitment criteria included the following: at least one adopted child (the "target child") was between the ages of 4 and 12 years; the target child had been adopted through a private agency before his or her first birthday; the adoption was not transracial, international, or special needs; and both adoptive parents were married to each other since the time of the adoption. We simultaneously sought birth mothers who made adoption plans for children placed with these families.

At wave 1 (1986–1992), participants included 720 individuals: both parents in 190 adoptive families, one target adopted child in 171 of the families (90 males, 81 females), and 169 birth mothers. The vast majority of adoptive parents were Caucasian, Protestant, and middle to upper-middle class. Adoptive couples identified themselves as Caucasian ($n = 177$), Latino ($n = 3$), African American ($n = 1$), and Latino and Caucasian ($n = 1$). Eight couples did not report their race but were identified as Caucasian by interviewers. These adoptive couples reflect the

¹In the United States, private agencies include licensed nonprofit organizations that place children for adoption, some sponsored by religious organizations such as Lutheran Social Services or Catholic Charities. Private agencies are differentiated from public agencies (e.g., state or county social services) that have guardianship of children who have been removed from their parents' homes due to abuse, neglect, chemical dependency, or serious mental illness.

²For information about other topics examined with wave 2 data, please see the following: identity (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004); family dynamics and change in openness over time (Dunbar et al., 2006); adolescents' satisfaction with contact (Mendenhall, Berge, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004; Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006); search for birth family information (Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004); sibling relationships and openness (Berge, Green, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006); and psychological adjustment (Grotevant, Wrobel, van Dulmen, & McRoy, 2001; Von Korff et al., 2006).

population of families who formally adopted unrelated children and birth mothers who voluntarily placed their children for adoption in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Bachrach, Adams, Sambrano, & London, 1990). Virtually all adoptive parents in the study had adopted because of infertility. The average level of education was 16.2 years for adoptive fathers and 15.1 years for adoptive mothers. Adoptive fathers ranged in age from 32 to 53 years (mean, 40.7) and adoptive mothers from 31 to 50 years (mean, 39.1).

Birth mothers ranged in age from 14 to 36 years (mean, 19.1) at the time their children were born. Almost two-thirds of the birth mothers delivered when they were teenagers. At wave 1, the birth mothers ranged in age from 21 to 43 years (mean, 27.1), and the average number of years of education attained was 13.5. In terms of ethnicity, 157 (92.9 percent) were Caucasian, 4 (2.4 percent) were Latino, 2 (1.2 percent) were Native American, 1 each were African American and Asian American, and 4 did not list their ethnicity. Half of the birth mothers were married by wave 1, and they had from one to five children. Most birth mothers made adoption plans for the children because they wanted the children to be raised in a two-parent family that could provide better educational and economic opportunities than they felt they could provide.

At wave 2 (1996–2001), participants included the adoptive parents and target adopted adolescents from 177 of the original 190 adoptive families: 173 adoptive mothers, 162 adoptive fathers, and 156 adopted adolescents (75 boys and 81 girls). Wave 2 data are also available on 88 siblings and 127 birth mothers, but they are not included in this report. At wave 2, most adoptive parents were still married. Of the 177 participating families, 11 couples had experienced divorce or separation, and 3 had experienced the death of one partner. Adoptive fathers ranged in age from 40 to 60 years (mean, 49.3), adoptive mothers ranged from 40 to 57 years (mean, 47.4), and adopted adolescents ranged in age from 11 to 20 years (mean, 15.7).

Procedures and Measures

At wave 2, adoptive families were seen in their homes during a single session that typically lasted 4 to 5 hours. The session included individual interviews with each parent and the target adopted child (approximately 1 to 2 hours each), administration of several questionnaires, and administration of a family interaction task. Some family members were interviewed by telephone (16 fathers, 20 mothers, 14 adolescents, 2 siblings) when it was impossible to gather everyone together for the home visit (e.g., if the family was living outside of the United States or had a child away at college). Interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim from audiotape; names and identifying information were changed in order to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Adoptive Parent Interview—The semi-structured interview for adoptive parents included questions that tapped a wide range of topics related to adoption, including their experiences with being an adoptive family in society, the relationship with the target child, the family's specific experiences with birth family members, views about various openness arrangements, and hopes for the future regarding their relationships with birth family members. The codebook for the adoptive parent interview documents coding criteria for each item. Graduate students, mature undergraduates in the social sciences, or the principal investigators coded the full transcript for each variable. Each interview was coded independently by two coders; disagreements were resolved through discussion. Coders were trained to an initial criterion of 80 percent exact agreement using codebooks and criterion interviews. In-terater reliabilities were calculated prior to consensus discussion and were monitored throughout the course of coding. Percentage of exact agreement was used in reliability calculations because it required perfect agreement between coders and was therefore a stringent criterion.

Adopted Adolescent Interview—The adolescent interview at wave 2 elicited open discussion of the adolescent’s experiences, feelings, knowledge and attitudes about his or her adoption, adoptive identity, adoptive family situation, and birth parents. It included general questions about adoption as well as questions specific to the adolescent’s openness arrangement. The openness topics included the breadth and diversity of persons within the adoptive kinship network with whom the child has or has had contact, changes in intensity of contact, withholding of information or contact by parents, and feelings regarding birth family members, such as satisfaction with the relationship, satisfaction with openness arrangements, and desired future intensity of contact. Two trained raters coded each interview independently and then met to resolve disagreements. Codebooks are available from the first author upon request.

RESULTS

Results are presented in three sections: description of the openness arrangements experienced within adoptive kinship networks, satisfaction with openness arrangements, and looking to the future.

Openness Arrangements

Openness arrangements were coded into four categories using parents’ and adolescents’ interviews: (1) no contact ($n = 51$), (2) stopped contact ($n = 40$), (3) contact without meetings (contact is occurring, but the adolescent has not had face-to-face contact with his or her birth mother) ($n = 34$), and (4) contact with meetings (adolescent has had face-to-face contact with his or her birth mother) ($n = 52$). See Table 1 for a fuller description of each group. Although contact experiences make each of these groups distinct from the others, variability in contact exists within each group, especially the two groups having contact. Mean differences between groups may obscure variability within groups, but this variability will be noted in the pages that follow. This report focuses on the quantitative results derived from coded semi-structured interviews. Qualitative reports from the project (e.g., Dunbar, van Dulmen, Ayers-Lopez, Berge, Christian, Goss-man, Henney, Mendenhall, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006) complement this paper and provide more detail at the individual case level.

Adolescents’ knowledge about their birth mother was coded from the question, “Tell me about your birth mother—what do you know about her?” as well as other relevant comments made throughout the interview. Knowledge varied widely across topics and openness arrangements (Table 2). Adolescents with no contact knew little about their birth mother, with the exception of her age (39 percent), appearance (39 percent), and reasons for placing the child (32 percent). A similar pattern held for families in which contact had stopped. Adolescents who had had contact without meetings knew more factual information as well as more personal information. Adolescents having contact with meetings knew the most factual and personal information and were more likely than those in the other groups to have said they knew “everything” about their birth mother.

Even though adolescents in different openness arrangements may report that they know a particular piece of information (e.g., birth mother’s appearance), the nature of the information may be very different across groups. Children in adoptions with no contact may have a social worker’s description of the birth mother’s appearance at the time of placement, whereas children with current contact may have recently seen their birth mother.

All adolescents were asked a general question, “How do you feel about your birth mother?”, regardless of whether they had contact. Responses about feelings toward birth mothers were coded separately for positive and negative affect, since positive and negative feelings can vary independently of each other. A 5-point scale was used, with 1 indicating no positive (or

negative) affect or no feelings about her, 3 indicating moderate positive (or negative) affect, and 5 indicating strong positive (or negative) affect. Value 2 fell between 1 and 3, and value 4 fell between 3 and 5. Examples of positive affect included descriptions of adolescents' feelings about their birth mother that used words such as love, happiness, excitement, interest, pride; examples of negative affect included words such as sadness, nervousness, anxiety, shame, anger.

Adopted adolescents' positive feelings about their birth mothers varied significantly as a function of openness arrangements ($F [3, 130] = 10.00; P < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .19$) Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that the mean level of positive affect was significantly higher in the contact with meetings group than in the no contact or stopped contact groups. The mean for the group with the lowest level of positive affect was 2.50, slightly below moderate, and the highest was more than a full point higher. Negative feelings about birth mothers did not vary as a function of openness arrangement. The mean levels ranged between 1 (no negative affect) and 1.5 (just above none). Means for each openness arrangement are presented in Table 3.

Adolescents Having Contact With Meetings—Of the adolescents who had ever met any birth relative, the frequency of contact varied widely, as indicated in Table 4. Although 52 adolescents had met their birth mother, only 12 had met their birth father, 16 had met a birth grandparent, 25 had met a birth sibling, and 12 had met other birth relatives. Just as frequency of contact varied across the 52 adolescents, so did their views of the role that their birth mother played in their lives. The largest groups felt their birth mother was a close or special friend (25.0 percent) or acquaintance or casual friend (22.7 percent). Others saw their birth mother as a relative (15.9 percent), another parent (11.4 percent), or playing a “birth mother role” (15.9 percent). Some (9.1 percent) said she had “no role,” even though they had met.

Adolescents having contact with meetings were asked how they felt after the meetings. Each adolescent's interview response was coded for the predominant three descriptors. Frequencies of the descriptors are presented in Table 5. Half of the responses were accounted for by two categories: “pleasure/happiness/contentment” and “anxious/apprehensive/concerned/nervous/tense/weird.” None of the adolescents reported feelings of fear, hatred, surprise, anger, or confusion about who their parents were. Twenty-seven adolescents (51.9 percent) reported a mixture of descriptors that seemed to include both positive and negative feelings after meetings. A typical combination was “nervous” and “very happy.” A total of 21 adolescents (40.4 percent) reported only positive feelings, 2 (3.8 percent) reported only negative feelings, and 2 (3.8 percent) said they did not remember how they felt. The latter two adolescents said they had only met their birth mother once.

Satisfaction With Openness Arrangements

Adopted adolescents and their parents were individually asked about their degree of satisfaction with their openness arrangements, no matter how much contact had occurred. A family member with no birth parent contact could be very satisfied that there was no contact or could be very dissatisfied, wishing for more. Likewise, persons with contact could be satisfied with the level of contact they are having or could be dissatisfied, preferring more or less contact or a different type of contact. Interview responses of adoptive mothers, fathers, and adolescent adoptees were coded for satisfaction with openness using the same scale: 0 indicated very dissatisfied; 1, dissatisfied; 2, neutral; 3, satisfied; and 4, very satisfied. Mean satisfaction levels for adoptive mothers, adoptive fathers, and adolescent adoptees by openness arrangement are presented in Table 6.

The comparison groups for this analysis were no contact, stopped contact, contact without meetings involving the adolescent, and contact with meetings involving the adolescent. Preliminary analyses revealed that neither sex nor age were related to adolescent satisfaction

with openness arrangements, so they were not included in the following analyses. Analyses of variance revealed that mean differences in satisfaction with openness arrangements were significant for adopted adolescents and their adoptive mothers and approached significance for fathers: adolescents, $F(3, 133) = 16.21$; $P < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .27$; mothers, $F(3, 166) = 6.60$; $P < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .11$; fathers, $F(3, 154) = 2.19$; $P = .092$; partial $\eta^2 = .041$. Bonferroni post hoc tests for adolescents' satisfaction with openness arrangement revealed that the mean in the contact with meetings group was significantly higher than the means in the other three groups. For adoptive mothers, the mean in the contact with meetings group was significantly higher than the means in the no contact or stopped contact groups; the mean in the contact without meetings group was also higher than the mean in the no contact group. Although the overall F for fathers' means was not statistically significant, the relative order of the means followed a similar pattern to those of the adolescents and mothers. The intent of this analysis was to compare satisfaction levels within person (mother, father, adolescent) across the four openness arrangements. Comparison of means across the three family members within openness arrangements should not be made, because satisfaction was coded globally from respondents' entire interviews and the questions asked of the adolescents and their parents were not exactly the same.

Looking to the Future

Adopted adolescents, their mothers, and fathers were each asked about the intensity of contact they would like to occur between the adolescent and birth mother in the future. Interview responses were coded in terms of whether they would want to see the level of intensity decrease, stay the same, or increase and for parents, whether they expressed no personal preference and felt that the level of intensity should be up to their adolescent. Frequencies of responses for adolescents, mothers, and fathers by contact status are reported in Table 7.

The number of participants wanting to see the intensity of contact decrease in the future was extremely low: only 1 adolescent, 2 adoptive mothers, and no adoptive fathers, or 0.7 percent of all responses. Within the groups having no contact or stopped contact, we next compared the frequencies of respondents wanting the intensity of contact to increase with those wanting it to remain the same. For adolescents and mothers, significantly more wanted the intensity of contact to increase rather than stay the same (for adolescents, $\chi^2(1, n = 75) = 7.06$; $P < .01$; for mothers, $\chi^2(1, n = 35) = 10.32$; $P < .005$). The chi-square for fathers was not significant. Despite the higher proportion wishing the intensity of contact to increase, 34.7 percent of adolescents without current contact wanted their situation to remain the same in the future.

Even in the groups in which the adolescent already had contact with his or her birth mother (with or without meetings), a large number of respondents wanted to see the intensity of contact increase in the future (55.2 percent of adolescents, 42.2 percent of mothers, 36.8 percent of fathers). Significant proportions of mothers (32.7 percent of responses) and fathers (41.9 percent) felt that the intensity of future contact should be up to the adolescent. Parents' responses that contact should be up to the adolescent did not differ significantly across openness arrangements (for mothers, $\chi^2(3, n = 150) = 4.80$; ns; for fathers, $\chi^2(3, n = 124) = 1.85$; ns).

DISCUSSION

This paper has explored the diverse openness arrangements experienced by families in the United States whose adolescents joined them through adoption as infants in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The sample included families with no birth parent contact, families whose contact had stopped, families in which there was contact without face-to-face meetings between the child and birth mother, and families in which there was face-to-face contact. Adolescents with birth family contact all reported contact with birth mothers, but a number of them also saw a variety of other birth relatives at frequencies ranging from once ever to more than once a month.

Adolescents' knowledge about their birth mothers varied widely across openness groups and topics. Those without contact knew some factual information about their birth mothers but had little personal or current information. Those with contact knew a wide range of factual and personal information. Yet even within the contact with meetings group, variation was present. Frequency of contact and the birth mother's role in the adolescent's life may have influenced what was known. For example, it would seem easier to ask questions of a birth mother who feels like a friend and visits regularly than a birth mother who has "no role" in the child's life and has infrequent contact.

Adolescents who had contact with meetings expressed the strongest positive feelings about their birth mothers; those with no contact expressed a moderate level of positive feelings about their birth mothers. This is consistent with the findings of Hollenstein, Leve, Scaramella, Milfort, and Neiderhiser (2003) that birth parent information was positively associated with adoptive parents' perceptions of the birth parents. Greater exposure to one's birth mother can provide more opportunities for experiencing attributes that adolescents like about them. Negative feelings were low for all adolescents and did not vary as a function of contact. Thus, contact seemed to promote positive feelings from adopted adolescents but did not increase the expression of negative feelings about their birth mother. Those who had met their birth mothers were also asked how they felt after the meetings. Many reported a mixture of feelings such as "nervous, but very happy"; some reported only positive feelings, and only two reported only negative feelings. None reported being confused about who their parents were.

Adolescents and their adoptive mothers in the contact with meetings group reported the greatest satisfaction with their openness arrangements; those with no contact or stopped contact reported the least satisfaction with their arrangements. Looking to the future, participants having no contact were more likely to want contact to increase in the future rather than stay the same. Many participants already having contact wanted it to increase in the future. Fewer than 1 percent of the participants across all contact groups wanted to see the level of contact decrease.

The Dynamics of Openness

Adolescents in this study were adopted at a time when the idea of post-adoption contact was new and openness options were not routinely offered by placing agencies. Families had some guidance from agency personnel, especially in the early years following placement, but few had written agreements about contact, and adoptive parents and birth mothers largely worked out their relationships on their own.

The considerable variability in contact in this sample appears to be a result of the emotional distance regulation process occurring within each adoptive kinship network. This process of arriving at a mutually agreeable level of openness is like a "dance," in which the participants decide (sometimes consciously and deliberately; sometimes simply through experience) how close they will be and how much contact they will have (Grotevant, in press). As adoptive and birth family members become acquainted, they learn more about each other and monitor their relationship satisfaction and their feelings about one another as they make decisions about how close to become.

The constructs of affect, relationship expectations, and satisfaction with contact allow us to see the emotional distance regulation process in action (Grotevant, in press) and provide anchors for future empirical model testing. In this scenario, positive feelings about contact based on experience would lead to expectations that future contact would be at least as positive as the current situation. These expectations would influence satisfaction, reflecting the desire for greater intensity of contact in the future. This dynamic would elicit behavior in the family whose goal would be to increase contact. Conversely, less positive feelings (as a result of no

contact) could evoke less positive relationship expectations and lead to satisfaction with the status quo, not supporting a change toward increased contact. Problematic contact could result in less positive relationship expectations and dissatisfaction that would lead to reduced contact. In this sample, however, it is noteworthy that dissatisfaction with openness arrangements was almost always associated with the desire for more contact rather than less.

The process of building relationships between adoptive and birth family members is undoubtedly facilitated when adoptive parents empathically understand the perspectives of their children and the child's birth relatives (Neil, 2003). By the time the children in the present study were adolescents, adoptive kinship networks had settled into their openness arrangements as a result of the participants' own experiences. In contrast, when contact was initiated for external reasons (e.g., the couple feared they would not be able to adopt otherwise or the agency recommended it), Berry, Cavazos Dylla, Barth, and Needell (1998) found that over half of the families in their study reduced or ceased contact by the time the child was 5 years of age.

Adoptive kinship networks experiencing no contact have no direct basis upon which to make decisions about the desirability of contact. At wave 1, we found that the two most frequent reasons that adoptive parents gave for having a fear that their child's birth mother might try to reclaim him or her were (1) negative impressions about birth parents generally and (2) other people's experiences with adoption, including media "horror stories" and court cases (Grotevant et al., 1994). When adoptive parents lack personal experience with birth family members, their ideas may be shaped by stereotypes or negative stories, which are never superseded in their minds because the parents continue to have no personal contact that might challenge those impressions.

Openness arrangements continued to be dynamic, in part because of developmental change in the adolescents. Understanding the role of the birth mother in the adoptive kinship network is a normative developmental task for adolescent adoptees, whether they have contact or not. Part of this process involves integrating their knowledge of, feelings about, and contact with the birth mother into their representation of family. Consequently, during adolescence, the teens themselves often began pushing for more information or contact (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003). Some wanted health or medical information, as they were entering serious relationships and thinking about future marriage or children. Some who knew their birth mother wanted more information about other birth relatives. Others with no direct contact wanted to meet and include birth relatives in important celebrations, especially their high school graduation.

For families who have contact and want it, there appear to be a number of benefits. Adoptees with contact have more information about their birth relatives and their adoption histories than do those without contact (see also Logan & Smith, 2004). The information difference across openness arrangements is even greater than it may appear from the frequencies in Table 2. As life experiences lead adolescents to wonder about things they had not considered before—career choices, marriage, medical problems, pregnancies—those with contact have ready access to their birth mothers and can obtain the relevant information or perspectives in developmentally appropriate ways when they need to have it. Those with contact can obtain updated medical, health, or genetic information; this was the most frequently cited advantage of open adoption in the survey conducted by Miall and March (2005). In contrast, the information possessed by adolescents with no contact or stopped contact was frozen in time at placement or when the contact stopped.

These data revealed that many adolescents' meetings with birth relatives are an occasion for a mixture of feelings, especially pleasure intermingled with nervousness. However, it is especially noteworthy that no adolescents mentioned that meetings made them feel afraid,

surprised, angry, or confused about who their parents were. This should be reassuring to prospective adoptive parents who mention concern about confusion as a reason for not having birth parent contact. Once again, we have found no evidence that contact is inherently harmful to children's or adolescents' well-being (see also Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006). However, each adoptive kinship network is composed of a unique mix of individuals who bring with them their developmental histories, expectations about adoption and about relationships, and relationship skills (Grotevant, in press). Each kinship network finds its own unique way in deciding about contact.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Key strengths of this study include its being a large, nationwide longitudinal sample of children from homogeneous backgrounds (voluntary infant placements) with widely varying openness arrangements. Data were collected in families' homes using personal interviews as well as standardized measures. The sampling plan and procedures enhance the study's internal validity. However, relationships across the participants in the adoptive kinship network are shaped by birth family members as well as adoptive family members. Even though adoptive parents have full legal parenting rights, they as well as birth parents can request or prevent contact. Contact can only work when parties jointly determine arrangements that work for their unique situation. Thus, since this report has focused on adoptive family perspectives, it will be important to link these with understanding of birth family members' perspectives as well.

In addition, generalization to families with internationally adopted children or families whose children were placed at older ages because of birth family abuse or neglect must be made with caution. In the case of international adoption, adoptive parents must understand the distinctive cultural context of placing a child for adoption in the child's home culture. In some cultures, revealing an out-of-wedlock birth and placement could bring significant shame or even physical danger to the birth mother. In adoptions from care following abuse or neglect, families must think about the child's safety in considering openness arrangements. Researchers and practitioners are beginning to provide useful practice guidelines for such complex situations (Neil & Howe, 2004a).

Implications

A psychological shift is useful and perhaps necessary whenever adoptive parents agree to have contact with their child's birth relatives. They need to move from thinking of themselves as a nuclear family that has added a child to an adoptive kinship network in which their child permanently connects families of birth and rearing. This shift will be facilitated when parents are sensitive to the developmental needs of each of their adopted children. Decisions about openness arrangements need to take into account each adolescent's desires for contact and feelings about the birth mother as well as each birth mother's capacity to play the desired role in this relationship.

Our findings suggest that different adoptive kinship networks will select different openness arrangements when they are given the opportunity to make such decisions for themselves. Furthermore, these arrangements may change over time as circumstances and individuals change and as adoptive kinship network members learn about the benefits and challenges of the relationship and how to manage them. One size does not fit all. Thus, we have concerns about written agreements made at placement that lock participants into specified contact patterns. Contact agreements should acknowledge that circumstances and individuals may change and that all parties in the adoptive kinship network should retain some flexibility about arrangements for the future.

Virtually all adoption professionals note that adoptive families should have health and medical history information about their child's birth relatives. Some health and medical situations may not arise until years after placement, and our understanding of genetic effects continues to evolve (Perry, 2006). Conversely, health conditions that develop in the adoptee may be important for birth parents to know. Therefore, it is important that adoptive kinship networks with and without contact have viable avenues through which medical, health, and genetic information can be exchanged.

In future reports, we will examine birth mothers' views of contact and how contact intersects with the lives they have established with their husbands and new families. Furthermore, we will explore congruence and discrepancies between adoptive parents' and birth parents' views of the openness arrangements they have.

Acknowledgments

Support for the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project is acknowledged, with gratitude, from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; National Science Foundation; William T. Grant Foundation; Office of Population Affairs, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. We especially thank the adoptive parents, adopted children, and birth mothers for generously sharing their perspectives with us over a number of years.

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TABLE 1

Openness Arrangements of Adoptive Families at Wave 2

	Definition	No.	Valid %
No contact	No contact with birth relatives has occurred and no information has been shared beyond 6 months post-placement	51	28.8
Stopped contact	Information sharing and contact had stopped by time of the interview.	40	22.6
Contact without meetings	Adopted adolescent and/or family has had mediated or personal contact with birth mother, but adolescent has not had face-to-face contact; contact has not stopped	34	19.2
Contact with meetings	Adopted adolescent has had face-to-face contact with his/her birth mother at least once; contact has not stopped.	52	29.4
Did not participate at wave 2		13	–
Total		190	100

TABLE 2

Adopted Child's Knowledge of Birth Mother by Openness Level (N = 153)

Level	No Contact (n = 41)	Stopped Contact (n = 34)	Contact Without Meetings (n = 26)	Contact With meetings (n = 52)
	%	%	%	%
Factual information				
Name	12	21	62	94
Age	39	38	50	71
Marital status	7	24	77	88
Occupation	5	9	31	71
Appearance	39	35	73	98
Location	7	12	58	98
Whether parenting other children	10	29	58	87
Medical history/health information	12	9	12	58
Personal information				
Talents/interests	15	9	23	62
How she is doing	0	0	19	71
Reasons for placing child	32	35	46	77
Personality/behaviors	2	6	27	75
Whether she is interested in the child or wants contact with child	0	3	38	65
Other Information not coded above	41	26	40	33
Knows "everything"	0	0	4	50

Note: Adolescents who said they knew "everything" were given credit for each of the categories above, with the exception of "other information not coded above."

TABLE 3
 Adolescents' Reported Feelings About Their Birth Mother, Analysis of Variance by Openness Level (N = 135)

	No Contact	Stopped Contact	Contact Without Meetings	Contact With Meetings	F	Partial η^2
Feelings about birth mother						
Positive affect	n = 36	n = 26	n = 23	n = 49		
Mean	2.50 _a	2.50 _b	3.09	3.62 _{a,b}	10.00 ^{***}	.19
SD	1.16	1.21	0.95	1.01		
Negative affect	n = 36	n = 26	n = 24	n = 49		
Mean	1.19	1.46	1.21	1.37	0.84, ns	.02
SD	0.67	1.03	0.51	0.78		

Note: For affect scales, 1 = no positive (or negative) affect, or "no feelings" about him/her, 3 = moderate positive (negative) affect, and 5 = strong positive (or negative) affect. Value 2 fell between 1 and 3, and value 4 fell between 3 and 5. Means in a row with the same subscript were found to be significantly different using Bonferroni post hoc tests.

*** $P < .001$.

TABLE 4
 Number of Adopted Adolescents in Contact With Meetings Group by Frequency of Their Reported Face-to-Face Contact With Specified Birth Family Members (N = 52)

Frequency of Face-to-Face Contact With:	Birth Mother		Birth Father		Birth Grandparent(s)		Birth Siblings		Other Birth Relative	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Once ever	7	13.5	4	33.3	6	37.5	4	16.0	4	33.3
Less than once a year	17	32.7	4	33.3	3	18.8	5	20.0	4	33.3
Once or twice a year	14	26.9	0	0.0	4	25.0	5	20.0	2	16.7
3 to 11 times per year or once a year for an extended visit (e.g., vacation)	9	17.3	0	0.0	2	12.5	7	28.0	0	0.0
More than 11 times per year or more than one extended visit	5	9.6	4	33.3	1	6.3	4	16.0	2	16.7
Total number of adolescents reporting face-to-face meetings	52	100	12	100	16	100	25	100	12	100

TABLE 5

Adopted Adolescents' Reports of Feelings After Meetings With Birth Relatives (N = 52)

Feelings	No.	%
Joy/elation/extreme happiness	14	13.9
Pleasure/happiness/contentment	27	26.7
Acceptance/resignation/indifference/"fine"	13	12.9
Supported/comforted	1	1.0
Relief	7	6.9
Curiosity/questioning	4	4.0
Sadness/depression/hurt/regret	8	7.9
Tough/hard/difficult/overwhelmed/frustrated	3	3.0
Anxious/apprehensive/concerned/nervous/tense/weird	24	23.8
Fear/scared/afraid	0	0
Hatred	0	0
Surprise/shock	0	0
Anger/hostility/resentment/bitter	0	0
Confusion about who their parents are	0	0
Total feelings	101	100

Note: Up to three feelings each were reported by the 52 adolescents.

Satisfaction With Openness Level for Adoptive Mothers, Adoptive Fathers, and Adopted Adolescents: Analysis of Variance by Openness Level

TABLE 6

	No Contact n = 37	Stopped Contact n = 31	Contact Without Meetings n = 21	Contact With Meetings n = 48	F	Partial η^2
Adolescent adoptees					16.21***	.27
Mean	1.73 _a	1.84 _b	2.24 _c	3.00 _{a,b,c}		
SD	0.96	1.00	1.04	0.80		
Adoptive mothers					6.60***	.11
Mean	2.77 _{a,b}	2.87 _c	3.56 _a	3.65 _{b,c}		
SD	1.45	1.42	0.91	0.84		
Adoptive fathers					2.19***	.04
Mean	3.18	3.09	3.29	3.66		
SD	1.28	1.29	0.90	0.94		

Note: 0 = very dissatisfied, 1 = dissatisfied, 2 = neutral, 3 = satisfied, 4 = very satisfied. Means in a row with the same subscript were found to be significantly different using Bonferroni post hoc tests.

P < .001

**
P = .092.

TABLE 7

Desired Level of Future Contact Between Adopted Adolescent and Birth Mother: Three Perspectives—Adolescents, Mothers, and Fathers—by Openness Level

	No Contact	Stopped Contact	Contact Without meetings	Contact With Meetings
Adopted adolescents	n = 41	n = 34	n = 26	n = 50
Decrease	0	0	1	0
Remain the same	14	12	6	27
Increase	27	22	19	23
Adoptive mothers	n = 33	n = 34	n = 32	n = 51
Decrease	0	0	1	1
Remain the same	3	5	5	24
Increase	15	12	18	17
It's up to the child	15	17	8	9
Adoptive fathers	n = 16	n = 32	n = 30	n = 46
Decrease	0	0	0	0
Remain the same	1	6	2	22
Increase	2	11	13	15
It's up to the child	13	15	15	9