Openness in Infant and Older Child Adoptions: Translating Research Findings into Practice

New Worlds of Adoption: Linking Research with Practice Conference
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Overview of Presentation

- Overview of history of openness in adoptions
- Research findings on contact in infant adoptions
- Research findings on contact in older child placements
  - Pre-finalization and Post-finalization Contact
- Practice implications
Changing Definition of Adoption

"We define adoption ... as a means of providing some children with security and meeting their developmental needs by legally transferring ongoing parental responsibilities from their birth parents to their adoptive parents ..."
...recognizing that in so doing we have created a new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child, who is shared by both.”

(Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 11)
Definitions

- Communicative openness (Brodzinsky, 2006)
- Structural openness
Legal Background

– In 1851, first U.S. law--Massachusetts--severing relationship with birthparents

– By 1917, Minnesota passed law barring inspection of adoption records

– By 1950 most states had sealed record laws
Movement Toward Openness in Infant Adoptions

- Movement toward openness started in private agency placements
- Contributors to changing practices
  - Reliable contraception & abortion
  - Decreased stigma associated with parenting outside marriage
  - Result: fewer babies to place
Changing Practices (cont’d)

- Demand for adoption continues to be high
- Birth parent awareness of possibility for contact after adoption
- Awareness of importance of genetic links
- Evolving view that contact may be in the “best interests of the child”

Result: movement toward open adoptions
Initial Concern about Openness: Is Contact Harmful?

- **Adopted children**: confusion, leading to adjustment problems

- **Adoptive parents**: fear of intrusion, lack of entitlement

- **Birthparents**: continual unresolved grief
Principal Investigators

- Ruth G. McRoy, MSW, Ph.D.
  University of Texas at Austin

- Harold D. Grotevant, Ph.D.
  University of Minnesota

- with Gretchen M. Wrobel, Ph.D.
  Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota

- and Susan Ayers-Lopez, Research Associate
Description of Research

- families recruited through 35 agencies
  - one child between 4 and 12 at time of interview; adopted as infant; average age 4 weeks, no tra, intercountry or special needs, both parents married
  - sought BP’s who placed with these families
  - only nationwide study of its kind
Types of Adoption

- Confidential Adoptions
- Time Limited Mediated Adoptions
- Ongoing Mediated Adoptions
- Fully Disclosed Adoptions
Wave 1

- Approximately 1/3 of sample in confidential adoptions
- Approx. 1/3 in mediated (indirect contact) adoptions
- Approx. 1/3 in fully disclosed open adoptions

190 adoptive couples: mostly White, middle to upper middle class; mean age 40 yrs

171 adopted children: ages 4-12 (M= 7.8 yrs); 81 females

169 birthmothers: 93% White, ages 14-36 at placement (M=19.3 yrs), wanted a better future for her child (voluntary placements)
Sample – WAVE ONE

- 77 corresponding sets
- Participants in 23 states--all regions of U.S.
Theories guiding investigation

- Grief and loss
- Family systems
- AOD
- Role theory
- Boundary ambiguity
- Child and adolescent development
- Adoptee identity
Adoptive Families

- Mostly White, middle and upper class; adopting because of infertility
  - college educated; over 50,000; 1.9 children in home
Birthmothers--two thirds were adolescents at delivery

- age range 14-36
- 21-43 at time of study
- 20-29,000 income
- 1/2 currently married, parenting 1-5 children
Openness--

- two third’s of the FD adoptions did not start out that way:
- 51% began as mediated adoptions and 15% began as confidential.
- In many cases, trust and mutual respect between parties led to change.
Wave 1: Selected Findings

- Birthmothers in confidential/time-limited mediated adoptions were significantly more likely to have lower grief resolution scores than birthmothers in ongoing mediated and fully disclosed adoptions.
Adoptive Parent Outcomes

In comparison to those in confidential adoptions, parents in fully disclosed adoptions showed...

- Greater empathy about adoption toward the birthmother and the child
- Higher levels of acknowledgment of the adoption
- Greater communication about adoption with the child
- Greater comfort with contact
- Less fear of reclaiming
Adoptive Parent Satisfaction

When adoptive parents were dissatisfied with contact, it was almost always because they wanted more (rather than less) contact, but were not able to bring it about.
Satisfaction with openness

Adolescents and parents having contact had higher % “satisfied or very satisfied” with openness level than those having no contact.
Management of Contact

- Relationships are dynamic and had to be re-negotiated over time.
- In the beginning meetings were very important
  - for the BMOS who were very concerned about whether they had made the right decision and if child was safe;
Openness Outcomes: Birthparents

- Lower levels of grief associated with having ongoing contact, choosing the adoptive parents;
- Highest grief among those who placed their children with understanding they would have ongoing information, but it stopped.
Management of Contact—a complex dance

- In later years, once birthmothers knew child was safe, sometimes they get more involved in their lives—new relationships, careers, etc, and may decrease contact.
- As AP’s become more secure in their role as parents, they may become more interested in contact.
- As children grow older and understand the meaning of adoption, they may pressure parents to seek more information.
Management of Membership in “Complex” Adoptive Kinship Network

- Negotiating a comfort zone of interaction
- Developmental needs of members of AKN may not be in synchrony
- Greater openness develops as trust accrues
- → Ongoing process of relationship development & maintenance
Conclusions

- Level of openness should be decided on case-by-case basis
- No single arrangement is best for everyone
- Each arrangement presents distinctive challenges & opportunities
- For adults who WANT an open arrangement, it can work well
- Open adoption makes family relationships more complex and increases need for communication & flexibility

8 years after Wave 1

At least one member in 177 of 190 original families – seen in their homes

- 173 adoptive mothers & 163 fathers
- 156 adopted adolescents (ages 11-20, average 15.6)
- 127 birthmothers
## Sample Size (N) - WI & WII

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Adolescents satisfied with having contact (45.5%) said:

- The relationship provides additional support for them.
- Contact helped them better understand who they are.
- Contact made them interested in having meeting other birth relatives, such as siblings.
“I didn’t actually feel a part of the (adoptive) family until I met my biological parents, and then it was like, I knew myself. I could become me, after meeting someone else (female, age 18).
Adolescents not satisfied with contact (16.3%) said:

- They wanted more contact but were unable to bring it about.
  - They felt they did not have to choose between adoptive parents and birth parents – could have good relationships with both.
In general...

- Those having contact liked it and wanted more.
- Those not having contact wanted it, and also had some concerns or negative feelings – but not based on actual interaction with birth relatives.
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For Further Information:

- For more information on the findings of this research and for a list of additional publications, go to the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project MTARP Website: http://fsos.che.umn.edu/projects/mtarp.html
Movement toward Openness in Older Child Placements

- Interest in maintaining family continuity
  - Increase in kinship and foster parent adoptions
  - Reducing disruptions for children
  - Most children adopted at older ages have had prior relationship with biological family
Benefits of Openness in Older Child Placements

- Can help some youth commit to adoption
- Can ease the transition to adoption
  - Hard for children to move on when they’re still worrying about whether their birth family is okay or not.
  - Prior foster families or birth family members can aid transition by assuring child that they love him and that being adopted is okay (NACAC, 2007)
Benefits of Contact

- Shows respect for child and assures child that their adoptive parents are not trying to sever ties to their past, they are better able to open up about their experiences and start healing old wounds.

- Keeping in touch can help children realize that others still care.
  - For children who have suffered loss, caring connections can be therapeutic.
Benefits of Contact

- Contact can help youth reconcile pieces of their identity.
  - Birthfamily members, neighbors, or past foster families may be able to address these concerns and share aspects of the family’s history—talents, accomplishments, stories—that are easier for the youth to own.
Openness and Adoptive Parent-Child Relationships

- Berry (1991; 1998) in California Long Range Adoption Study (CLAS) studied 764 families four years after placement found high levels of satisfaction with their adoption, regardless of whether open or closed.

- Frash, Brooks, Barth (2000) 8 year prospective longitudinal study of 231 foster care adoptions (CLAS) found satisfaction and consistency over time in most arrangements whether open or closed.

- Crea & Barth (2009) openness and contact at 14 years post placement—using CLAS data set; contact occurred more frequently in adoptions arranged independently; % of contact dropped significantly compared with earlier waves of data collection
Benefits of Contact

- Post adoption contact can help birth family members accept and support the adoption.
  - Neil (2006) found that when adoptive parents initiated contact, birth parents felt valued and adoption acceptance among birth parents rose substantially.

- Johnson & Ryan’s (2007) study of openness in families (N=429) with children age 13 or older found:
  - Most families who had contact with birthparents reported positive experiences
Benefits of Contact

- With teens especially, contact can help them understand their families’ limitations and in learning how to protect themselves in unsafe situations around them.
The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids Research Project

Openness in Special Needs Adoptions

Center for Social Work Research
School of Social Work
University of Texas at Austin
The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids,
Department of Health and Human Services,
Children’s Bureau

- Success Factors Study: Congressionally mandated
  - Children’s Health Act of 2000
- Nationwide Sample – 161 families
- Method: Interviews and Surveys
Successful Adoptive Families
Study: Family Recruitment

- Successful adoptive families were defined as:
  - families whose finalized adoptions remained intact
  - the adoptive parents remained committed to parenting the adopted child

- Special attention was placed on including families who had adopted:
  - older children (particularly ages 12-16)
  - sibling groups
  - children who had been in the foster care system for several years
Focus Child

One child in each family chosen as the focus of the study

- Oldest child,
- Child with the most challenges, or
- Most challenging child to parent
Demographics of focus children
N=161

- Gender of focus children:
  - Female 45% (n=72)
  - Male 55% (n=89)

- Age of focus children:
  - Range: 0-17 years
  - Avg. Age-- 6.5 years
  - 28% (n=45) children were 9 and older.

- Ethnicity of focus children:
  - Caucasian (non-Hispanic) 50% (n=80)
  - African American 19% (n=31)
  - Mixed 17% (n=27)
  - Hispanic 12% (n=20)
  - Native American 2% (n=3)
Adoptive Family Groups (N=104)

- No contact with any birth or foster family member (n= 16)
- Contact with one or both birthparents (n=34)
- Contact with other birth or foster family members but not birthparents (n=54)
Common Reasons Contact with Birthparents did not Continue Post-finalization

Birthparents are unable or unwilling to maintain contact:

“Mom didn’t relinquish rights, but she allowed them to terminate her rights. She just totally lost interest. She didn’t show up for anything. She just walked away from it. She didn’t want to be involved any more. ...” [Birthmother was ‘the main cause of the abuse and neglect.’]
Common Reasons Contact with Birthparents did not Continue Post-finalization

- Birthparent is troubled and adoptive parent believes contact should only occur when the focus child is older:

  “Dad spends so much time in prison that it’s really hard to know when he’s in, when he’s out, and what’s going on when he’s out... But if things would have been different, he had the potential to be a wonderful father. But because they [birthparents] were both really into drugs and a lot of stuff that could have been potentially been very, very harmful to the kids, it was just decided that it wasn’t a good idea to ever have a relationship with them until they [focus child and sib] were old enough and emotionally secure enough to be able to handle it.”

  [Birthfather was not a part of the family after removal; began a positive relationship with focus child after he was in foster care.]
Common Reasons Contact with Birthparents did not Continue Post-finalization

- **Contact appears to upset the child:**

  “I had concerns about contact. I didn’t want it. I know there are pros and cons to it, but I just felt ‘I want to adopt a child, I don’t want to adopt a family’. Every time those visits happened she would melt down. She’d regress, she’d start acting out, have high anxiety episodes. I started seeing this pattern every time she was forced to go to these visits.”
Adoptive Parents
Perceptions of Contact

- Most Liked About Contact:
  - Children’s right as part of their heritage (42% at pre-finalization and 48% at post-finalization).

- Most Disliked Aspect of Contact:
  - Adoptive parents worried because the birthmother is troubled or acts inappropriately (58% at pre-finalization and 38% at post-finalization).
Reasons that Adoptive Parents Support Contact

The focus child wants to maintain contact.

“It’s really important to her. We started doing this when she was having meltdowns... I’m serious, every one of them would end just in sobs, ‘I miss my family.’ And especially her sisters... and we were like ‘we have to fix this’... So that’s when we started trying to put those connections back together... And we haven’t had any of those issues [meltdowns] since then.”

[A family with post-placement meetings a few times a year.]
Challenges to Openness

- Substance abusing birthparents
- Inconsistent visitation/broken promises to the child
- Children’s ability to relate to two families
- Birthparent issues—mental health/violence
- Adversarial court proceedings
Promoting Safety in Openness

- Adoptive parents must set parameters around the amount and kind of contact, the degree of supervision needed, and strategies for avoiding uncomfortable situations.
- Adoptive parents must be prepared to help their children through any acting out that can result from contact. If any contact gets negative, parents should limit or stop it.
Promoting Safety in Openness

- Parents should instruct youth how to assess danger, extricate themselves from unhealthy situations, and address uncomfortable questions.

  - “I call my mom if I feel uncomfortable, and she will be right there.”
Adoptive Parents’ Role

- Help child explore the past and prepare for the future—by making or maintaining connections with birth families and former caregivers.

- These connections can help children and youth gain a better sense of who they are and more readily accept their place in the adoptive family.

(NACAC, 2007)
For Further Information Contact:

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