



“Add as Friend?”: Adoptive 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 drastically shifted interpersonal contact between adoptive and birth families. Such advances allow for an increasing level of openness through access to individuals’ personal information, sometimes in spite of barriers established by the adoption agency or judicial system. The current qualitative study of 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 3 single women) who had adopted a child five years earlier (53.2% open domestic private, 23.4% domestic public, 19.5% international, 3.9% closed domestic private) focused on the level and medium of contact adoptive families had with birth families, and how parents felt 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 contact versus no contact/passive contact), most parents felt positively or ambivalently about future connections with birth family via technology. Professionals working with adoptive families should aim to help them navigate these relationships, set appropriate boundaries, and to 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, adoptive families, and for the children became increasingly clear (Miall & March, 2005). Research has primarily focused on open adoption arrangements and changes in such arrangements over time (Crea & 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 families. Such advances allow for an increasing level of openness through access to individuals’ personal information -- sometimes in spite of barriers established by the adoption agency or judicial system. Furthermore, those with agreements for post-adoption contact have a higher likelihood of being contacted by the child’s birth family (Faulkner & Madden, 2012), which has implications for connections via technology. Even when adoptive parents support openness in relationships with birth family members, they still face challenges in navigating boundaries and contact (Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Downing, 2011). Siegel (2012) notes that while some parents may feel excited, curious, or hopeful about their child’s connection to their birth parents, others may also feel fear, panic, uncertainty, loss, and vulnerability.

Research Questions

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

1. **What level of contact** do parents have with their child’s birth family via technology (e.g., texting, email, social media)? **Are parents actively engaging** with, or just searching for information about, birth family members?
2. **How do parents feel about future connection** with birth family members? How does the level of current contact via technology relate to parent 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 3 single women) were analyzed. The sample was derived from a larger longitudinal study focused on the transition to parenthood among couples who had adopted a child five years earlier (53.2% open domestic private, 23.4% domestic public, 19.5% international, 3.9% closed domestic private). Participants were predominantly White, and fairly affluent (see Table 1 for demographic information).

Table 1
Demographic Data and Contact with Birth Family, by Family Type

	Lesbian (M, SD, or % of n = 28)	Gay men (M, SD, or % of n = 22)	Hetero (M, SD, or % of n = 27)	Total sample (M, SD, or % of n = 77)
Age (years)	46.58 (5.88)	44.68 (3.29)	41.31 (4.23)	44.19 (5.15)
Personal income	\$60,046 (\$7,493)	\$77,955 (\$56,703)	\$55,167 (\$42,792)	\$63,543 (\$46,267)
Family income	\$108,462 (\$38,205)	\$158,571 (\$52,942)	\$110,111 (\$53,066)	\$123,284 (\$51,939)
White (adults)	96%	82%	89%	90%
White (children)	14%	18%	33%	22%
Child age	6.44 (2.11)	5.47 (0.70)	6.02 (1.75)	6.01 (1.71)
<i>Adoption type</i>				
Public domestic	29%	27%	15%	23%
Closed private domestic	4%	9%	0%	4%
Open private domestic	46%	55%	59%	53%
International	21%	9%	26%	19%
<i>Birth family contact</i>				
No contact	36%	27%	33%	32%
Non-identifying exchange of photos/letters	21%	9%	11%	14%
Identifying information exchanged	18%	27%	30%	25%
Placement included formal plan for ongoing contact	14%	27%	26%	22%
<i>Number of contacts with birth family in past year</i>				
Text message	5.21 (14.14)	1.36 (6.40)	0.78 (2.67)	2.38 (9.01)
Phone	1.25 (2.09)	0.50 (1.10)	1.07 (2.29)	0.95 (1.92)
Email	1.13 (2.61)	1.73 (3.58)	1.85 (4.38)	1.62 (3.60)
Social networking	8.67 (28.14)	0.64 (2.15)	0.59 (2.04)	3.22 (16.33)

Procedure

Participants completed a **semi-structured telephone interview** (60-90 minutes). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were assigned. Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), grounded in a Couple and Family Technology Framework (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

Analysis focused on the following interview questions: 1. What role does technology play in your relationship with your child’s birth family? Are you Facebook “friends” with any of them, or do they read your blog? 2. To what extent has technological communication been a source of stress, or to what extent has it made communication easier? 3. How do you imagine technology might play a role in your relationships in the future? Do you ever think about the possibility that your child might search for birth family members, or vice versa? 4. To what extent does that concern you?

Results

Type of Contact

Types of contact described by participants are included in Table 2, with a breakdown according to family type and gender. **Our findings indicate that most parents were already in contact** (e.g., Facebook friends, email exchanges, texting) **with birth parents.**

Table 2
Type of Contact via Technology, by Family Type

	Total sample (n; % of n = 77)	Lesbian (n; % of n = 28)	Gay (n; % of n = 22)	Hetero men (n; % of n = 12)	Hetero women (n; % of n = 15)
<i>Active Contact</i>					
Text	5 (6%)	1 (4%)	2 (9%)	0 (0%)	2 (13%)
Email	16 (21%)	6 (21%)	4 (18%)	2 (17%)	4 (26%)
Social media	14 (18%)	4 (14%)	3 (14%)	3 (25%)	4 (26%)
<i>Passive Contact</i>					
Yahoo groups	2 (3%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7%)
Social media “tracking”	11 (14%)	3 (11%)	6 (27%)	0 (0%)	2 (13%)
<i>No Contact</i>					
	25 (32%)	10 (36%)	6 (27%)	4 (33%)	5 (42%)

Parents reported two main types of contact with their child’s birth family members: **Active contact and passive contact.** In **active contact, there was an exchange of information between the two families, with back-and-forth communication via text, emails, or social media.** In **passive contact,** the adoptive family sought out birth family members via technology, “tracking” their activity, **but did not take the next step of initiating and maintaining contact,** via online support groups, as well as both general internet searches and social media searches (most often utilizing Facebook). **Some parents engaged in both active and passive contact** (e.g., they emailed back and forth with the birth family, but also “tracked” them on social media, without the knowledge of the birth family).

Active Contact

Thirty-five (45%) parents engaged in active contact with their child’s birth family. Sarah, a 45 year old heterosexual mother of a six year old girl adopted internationally hired someone in China to locate her child’s foster family in China, whom she met via a Yahoo group. She explained that, **“without email, we wouldn’t have any connection.”** She plans to someday also find the birth family. Parents who endorsed this theme used technology to share pictures of the child with the birth family, arrange get-togethers, and to keep in touch about their lives in general, with both sides actively sharing information. **“We are in kind of, mostly, Facebook contact with [birth mother]”**, said Mark, a 48 year old gay father of a five year old son adopted privately, and whose placement included a formal plan for ongoing contact with birth family members.

Passive Contact

Thirteen (17%) parents had passive contact with their child’s birth family members. One type of passive contact that some parents described was social media “stalking,” which involved searching for Facebook profiles of birth family members, without reaching out to “friend” them. Shelly, a 36 year old lesbian mother of a five year old daughter adopted privately, whose placement included a formal plan for ongoing contact with the birth family, explained that **“[Birth mother] is not really on Facebook, but we kind of stalk her a little bit. Like, you know, we’re kind of curious [about], like, what she’s up to.”** Other parents looked up birth family members on Facebook and downloaded and saved their information, including photos. Gary, a 45 year old gay father of a five year old daughter adopted privately, whose placement included a formal plan for ongoing contact, explained that he had **“looked [birth mother] up on Facebook and saved pictures that [he] could find.”** This “tracking” served to give parents information about the birth family that they might not have obtained through other means, helping the family to learn more about the details of birth family members’ lives (to satisfy personal curiosity and to share with their children), without having to engage with them.

Emotions Regarding Future Contact

Parent emotions about future contact varied. Despite current level of contact via technology, more parents felt positively or ambivalently about future contact than negatively (see Table 3).

Table 3
Emotions about Future Contact

	Lesbian (n; % of n = 19)	Gay (n; % of n = 16)	Hetero men (n; % of n = 8)	Hetero women (n; % of n = 11)	Total (n; % of n = 54)
<i>Current Contact</i>					
Positive feelings about future contact	2 (11%)	1 (6%)	1 (13%)	2 (18%)	6 (11%)
Ambivalent about future contact	3 (16%)	6 (38%)	0 (0%)	1 (9%)	10 (19%)
Negative feelings about future contact	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (13%)	1 (9%)	2 (37%)
<i>No Current Contact/Passive Contact</i>					
Positive feelings about future contact	3 (27%)	4 (33%)	1 (25%)	3 (43%)	11 (32%)
Ambivalent about future contact	3 (27%)	7 (58%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (29%)
Negative feelings about future contact	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	1 (25%)	2 (29%)	4 (12%)

Parents with Current Contact: Feelings about Future Contact

For parents who had current contact with their child’s birth family via technology, feelings about future contact varied. Six parents felt positively about future contact. Jaime, a 34 year old heterosexual mother of a five year old son who was adopted domestically, and who has exchanged information with the birth family, said, **“If we found out that it was a safe relationship and we could meet with them somewhere, I would be fine with that.”**

Other parents were more hesitant: Ten felt ambivalently about future contact. Carly, a 44 year old lesbian mother who had adopted siblings domestically, and who had exchanged identifying information with the birth family, said, **“But you know, you just do the best that you can. You can’t hide it. It is what it is.”**

No Current Contact/Passive Contact

For parents who had no current contact or who had passive contact with their child’s birth family, emotions about future contact varied. Eleven parents felt positively about future contact, looking forward to supporting their child’s relationship with birth family via technology. Mandy, a 52 year old lesbian mother of a four year old son adopted through the foster care system explained, **“I would like to seek out the mom. I don’t think we’ll ever find dad. I think it would be great for them to have some kind of contact, definitely.”** It’s possible that parents felt positively because they currently have a less realistic portrait of the birth family than those who have current contact.

Ten parents felt ambivalently about contact with birth family members, many because they felt unprepared. Jane, a lesbian mother of a six year old daughter adopted internationally waived: **“I can’t imagine, I think that would be really—I don’t know, that would be a lot, especially if that’s not what you were looking for, you know.”** Four parents felt strongly about not wanting contact with their child’s birth family via technology, citing birth family instability (e.g., emotional instability, substance abuse issues).

Conclusion

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

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