"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 dramatically shifted daily routines for adoptive and birth families. Such advances allow for an increasing level of openness through social networking, and sometimes in spite of barriers established by the adoption agency or birth family, contacts are initiated. 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 using thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2012) to examine technology in the context of parental exchange (e.g., Facebook, email, text, or phone) with their child’s birth family. Parents reported two main types of contact with their birth child family members: Active contact and passive contact. In active contact, there was an exchange of information between a birth family, with face-to-face communication via text, email, or social media. For passive contact, the information exchange was not initiated by the child or birth family but was generated by the adoptive family, such as both general information and social media exchanges. This is a qualitative study on parents’ perceptions of contact through social networking (e.g., Facebook), email, and text.

Results

Type of Contact

Types of contact described by participants are included in Table 2. Our findings indicate that most parents were already in contact (e.g., Facebook, emails, face-to-face exchanges) with birth parents.

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, adoptions have become increasingly open as the benefits of open adoption for birth families, adoptive families, and adopted children have become increasingly clear (Mull & 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 through both 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 have created increasing levels of openness through social networking, access to individuals’ personal information, and sometimes in spite of barriers established by the adoption agency or birth family. Furthermore, those agreements for post-adoption contact have a wide range of content, including being more open about contact with the birth child’s family (Pawlinka & Madden, 2012), which has implications for contact through social networking and technology. This study explores how adoptive parents support open relationships in their birth families and how they face challenges in navigating boundaries and contact (Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Duvvury, 2011; Varol, 2012) notes that while parents may feel excited, curious, or hopeful about their children’s connection to their birth parents, they also feel fear, uncertainty, and anxiety. Parents reported two main types of contact with their birth child family members: Active contact and passive contact. In active contact, there was an exchange of information between those families, with face-to-face communication via text, email, or social media. For passive contact, the information exchange was not initiated by the child or birth family but was generated by the adoptive family, such as both general information and social media exchanges.

Method

Participans

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) who had adopted a child five years earlier (53.5% open domestic, 23.6% domestic, and 26% international) and who had used services with the birth family included in the sample were obtained from a larger longitudinal study focused on the transition to parenthood among couples who went through foster care adoption. The sample of 77 individuals included 24 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 (25.6% open domestic, 30.4% domestic, and 43% international) focused on the level and medium of contact of adoptive families and whether parental expectations and transmission of contact with birth family members via technology. Findings indicate that many families were already connected through social media, email, and texting. Regardless of the current level of contact (active versus no contact), most parents felt positively or ambivalently about future connections with their birth family members. Professionals working with adoptive families should aim to help them navigate these relationships, set appropriate boundaries, and help them manage realistic expectations for future contact.

Research Questions

Little research to date has focused on how adoptive parents feel about current 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 birth child’s family via technology (e.g., texting, social media)? Are parents’ expectations of contact with their birth child’s family via technology in line with the level of contact they have?

2. How do parents make contact with birth family members? How does the level of current contact via technology relate to parents’ emotions about future contact?

No Current Contact/PasSive Contact

For parents who had no current contact or who had passive contact with their child’s birth family members, twelve of the fifteen parents felt positively about future contact. Eleven parents felt positively about future contact, looking forward to supporting their child’s relationship with birth family and being more open about contact in the future. For parents who had no current contact but who had had contact in the past year, six parents adopted their birth child and the reason was not clear. Six parents were adopted through the foster care system explained that "I would imagine I would be great for them to have some kind of connection..." while five parents explained that they felt positive because they currently have a less realistic portrait of the birth family than those who have current contact. For those who felt ambivalent about contact with birth family members, they often felt apprehensive. A lobster maternal of a six-year-old adopted child explained that he was surprised because "I can’t imagine, I think that would be really—I don’t know, that would be a lot, especially if that’s who 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 birth child’s family via technology, typically even online social media sites such as Facebook. Most parents feel positively or ambivalently 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, set boundaries when necessary, and help families have realistic expectations for future contact via technology with their child’s birth family. This study was funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation to the third author.

References


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