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## Openness in Adoptions from Foster Care:

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# Openness in Adoptions from Foster Care: Implications for Children and Families

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# Overview of Presentation

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- Brief overview of history of openness in adoptions
- Research findings on contact in older child placements
- Overview of the AdoptUSKids Research Project
- Openness research findings
  - Pre-finalization and post-finalization contact
- Practice implications

# Legal Background

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- In 1851, first U.S. law—Massachusetts—severing relationship with birth parents
- By 1917, Minnesota passed law barring inspection of adoption records
- By 1950, most states had sealed record laws.

# Movement Toward Openness in Infant Adoptions

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- 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 Practice (cont'd)

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

**Result:** Movement toward open adoptions. Ninety-five percent of agencies now offer open adoptions (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2012)

# Initial Concerns about Openness: Is Contact Harmful?

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- Adopted children: confusion, leading to adjustment problems
- Adoptive parents: fear of intrusion, lack of entitlement
- Birth parents: continuing unresolved grief

# Brief Overview of Investigators' Earlier Research on Openness

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- Ruth G. McRoy, MSW, Ph.D.
  - University of Texas at Austin; Boston College GSSW
  
- Harold D. Grotevant, Ph.D.
  - University of Massachusetts Amherst



# Theoretical Perspectives on Openness

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

# Openness and Adoptive Parent-Child Relationships

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- Johnson & Ryan's (2007) study of openness in families (N=429) with children age 13 or older found:
  - Adoptive parents' feelings regarding amount of child's contact with birth parents was a significant predictor of the adoptive parent-child relationship
  - Most families who had contact with birth parents reported positive experiences

# Openness and Adoptive Parent-Child Relationships

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- 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
- 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

# Perspectives of Adoptive Parents

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- A longitudinal study showed that adoptive parents remained highly positive with their child's open adoption from infancy to early childhood to adolescence, regardless of degree and type of contact
  - Many described the open adoption as not being a focal point in their family's life
  - Despite challenges and anxieties, adoptive parents viewed the openness as a facilitator of family closeness by enhancing trust and open communication

(Siegel, 2012)

# Perspectives of Adopted Children

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- Adopted children view open adoption favorably and positively endorse it
- Advantages include having more family, no secrets, access to useful information, being freed from the frustration of not knowing, being empowered by knowledge, feeling compassionate, fortunate, and secure
- Challenges include boundary issues, lack of contact, and receiving bad news
  - Children were able to draw positive aspects from challenges

(Siegel, 2012)

# Sibling Contact

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- A majority of adopted children have at least one birth sibling outside of their adoptive family.
- Complexity of sibling relationships
  - Wide variety of contact arrangements between birth siblings, birth parents, other birth relatives and adoptive families.
  - Birth siblings vs. adoptive siblings
  - Evolution of relationships and family dynamics across time
  - Concern about sharing of information, especially if one birth sibling is still living with or has a close relationship with birth family
  - Contact may be formal and rigid, lacking the fluidity of typical family relationships
- Adoptive parents view sibling contact as valuable to the adopted child's identity

(Cossar and Neil, 2012)

# Benefits of Openness in Older Child Placements

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- Can help some youth commit to adoption
- Can ease the transition of 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

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- 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

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- Contact can help youth reconcile pieces of their identity.
  - Birth family 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.
- 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.

# Benefits of Contact

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- With teens especially, contact can help them understand their families' limitations and in learning how to protect themselves in unsafe situations around them.

# AdoptUSKids Research Project

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## Openness in Adoptions from Foster Care

# AdoptUSKids, Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau

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- 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

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- Successful 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

# Demographics of Adoptive Families (N=161)

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## Average Age

Mothers: 45

(range: 28-64)

## Average Income

\$61,991

(range: \$1,300-\$170,000)

## Average # of Adopted Children

2.7

(range: 1-10 children)

Fathers: 46

(range: 29-72)

## Family Ethnicity

### N

### Percent

African American

18

11%

Caucasian

128

80%

Hispanic (of any race)  
or Latino ethnicity

5

3%

Interracial

9

6%

Multiple races indicated

1

<1%

# Focus Child

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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)

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- Gender of focus children:
  - Female 45% (n=72)
  - Male 55% (n=89)
- Age of focus children at placement:
  - Range: 0-17 years
  - Average Age: 6.5 years
  - 28% (n=45) children were 9 and older.
- Ethnicity and race of focus children:

• African American	19% (n=31)
• American Indian or Alaska Native	2% (n=3)
• Caucasian	50% (n=80)
• Hispanic (of any race) or Latino ethnicity	12% (n=20)
• Multiple races indicated	17% (n=27)



# Adoptive Family Contact Groups (N=161)

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- No contact with any birth family member (n=46)
- Contact with one or both birth parents (n=55)
- Contact with other birth family members, but not birth parents (n=60)

# Statistically Significant Findings

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- The focus child's age at placement and age at the time of interview were higher for those families who had contact with birth family members other than birth parents, as compared to families who had no contact with any birth family members.
- Children whose families had contact with their birth parents had been in the adoptive home longer than children whose families had contact with birth family members other than birth parents.
- Proportionally more children whose families had contact with birth family members other than birth parents were removed due to physical neglect.

# Statistically Significant Findings (continued)

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- The type of adoption (general, foster, child-specific, etc.) varied across the contact groups. Some trends:
  - Families who had contact with birth parents more frequently had been the child's foster parents prior to adoption.
  - Families who had no birth parent contact, but had contact with other birth family members, more frequently adopted a child with whom they had no prior relationship.
  - Relative/kinship adopters always had contact with at least one birth parent.
  - Of the families who had no contact with any birth family members, over half were general adopters.

# Items that Were Not Statistically Significant Across Groups

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- No differences were found by adoptive parents' education and age, family ethnicity, placement with siblings, satisfaction with adoption, number of adopted children, or transracial or inracial adoption.

# Experiences with Birth Parent Contact

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**Families in Contact with Birth Parents  
(n=55)**

## Birth Parent Contact Groups (n=55)\*

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- **Pre-finalization contact:** contact with one or both birth parents occurs while the child is placed in the adoptive family's home (either as a foster, relative, or foster to adopt placement) prior to finalization of the adoption and does not continue past finalization (21 families).
- **Post-finalization contact:** contact with one or both birth parents occurs after finalization. Most of these families also had contact pre-finalization (29 families), while a few had contact only at post-finalization (4 families).

\*Note: Unable to determine time of contact for one family.

# Families with BPA Contact

Ages of Focus Children (55 = # children)

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	<b>Age at Placement</b>	<b>Age at Interview</b>
Average	6.3	12.5
Minimum	infant	4
Maximum	17	20

# Comparison Between Contact with Birth Mothers and Birth Fathers (n=55)

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- 32 families (58%) in contact with birth mothers only
- 4 families (7%) in contact with birth fathers only
- 19 families (35%) in contact with both birth parents



# Adoptive Families in Contact with Birth Fathers (n=23)

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- 15 families (65%) in contact pre-finalization only
- 3 families (13%) in contact post-finalization only
- 5 families (22%) in contact both pre- and post-finalization

# Adoptive Parents Experiences with Birth Father Contact

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- Pre-finalization (n=20)
  - 5 (25%) had frequent contact, while 8 (40%) had infrequent contact; 7 (35%) were missing data for frequency of contact
  - 12 (60%) were uncomfortable about the child's contact, while 4 (20%) were comfortable, and 1 (5%) felt neutral; 3 (15%) were missing data for level of comfort
- The top concern about contact at pre-finalization was that the birth father was troubled or acted inappropriately.
- Post-finalization (n=8)
  - 1 (12.5%) had frequent contact, while 7 (87.5%) had infrequent contact
  - 3 (37.5%) were comfortable with the contact, while 3 (37.5%) were uncomfortable with the contact, and 2 (25%) reported mixed feelings
- The top concern about contact post-finalization was that the birth father didn't seem interested in the contact.

# Adoptive Parents Experiences with Birth Father Contact (Subgroup of Parent Only Contact)

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- Pre-finalization (n=2)
  - Both had infrequent contact
  - One was comfortable about the birth parent contact, while one felt neutral
  - One reported a concern about contact at pre-finalization that the birth father was troubled or acted inappropriately.
- Post-finalization (n=1)
  - Had infrequent contact
  - Reported mixed feelings
  - No specific concerns were reported about contact post-finalization

# Adoptive Families in Contact with Birth Mothers (n=51)\*

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- 19 families (37%) in contact pre-finalization only
- 3 families (6%) in contact post-finalization only
- 28 families (55%) in contact both pre- and post-finalization

# Types of Pre-Finalization Contact with Birth Mothers

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- 23 families (49%) reported receiving cards, letters, emails, or phone calls; 20 of these 23 families went on to have post-finalization visits.
- 14 families (30%) reported day visits pre-finalization; 13 of which also had post-finalization day visits.
- 4 (9%) reported night visits; 2 of which also had post-finalization night visits.

# Types of Post-Finalization Contact with Birth Mothers

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- 25 families (81%) in contact with birth mothers post-finalization reported receiving cards, letters, emails, or phone calls.
- 14 families (45%) reported day visits and 5 (16%) reported night visits post-finalization.

# Types of Contact with Birth Mothers

## (Subgroup of Parent Only Contact)

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- Four families reported receiving cards, letters, or emails pre-finalization
- Six families reported receiving cards, letters, or emails post-finalization, and one family reported also receiving phone calls

# Frequency of Contact with Birth Mother

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- Of the 36 families that reported how frequently they had pre-finalization contact with the birth mother, 13 (36%) reported frequent contact, while the majority, 23 (64%) reported infrequent contact.
- Of the 28 families that reported how frequently they had post-finalization contact with the birth mother, 7 (25%) reported frequent contact, while 21 (75%) reported infrequent contact.



# Frequency of Contact with Birth Mother (Subgroup of Parent Only Contact)

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- Three families reported infrequent contact pre-finalization; frequency of contact information was missing for another family with parent only contact pre-finalization.
- Five families reported infrequent contact post-finalization; frequency of contact information was missing for another family with parent only contact post-finalization.

# Common Reasons Contact with Birth Parents Did Not Continue Post-Finalization

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- Birth parents were 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 anymore...”

# Common Reasons Contact with Birth Parents Did Not Continue Post-Finalization

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- Birth parent 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 [birth parents] were both really into drugs and a lot of stuff that could have been potentially 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.”  
[Birth father was not a part of the family after removal; began a positive relationship with focus child after he came into foster care.]

# Common Reasons Contact with Birth Parents Did Not Continue Post-Finalization

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- Focus child did not want contact with the birth parent:
  - “I just happened to go to the store and the father was there and he started calling me all kinds of bad words and insulting me. And [focus child] was with me, and he was very much afraid and even the store owner was afraid – he was getting ready to call the police... Later, when [focus child] had an opportunity to say hi to his birth father, and he said, ‘No, I don’t want to wave to him, I don’t even want to see him; I don’t want him to see me.’ ”

# Common Reasons Contact with Birth Parents Did Not Continue Post-Finalization

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- Contact appeared 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' Level of Comfort with Birth Mother Contact Pre- and Post- Finalization

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- Of the 44 families that reported how comfortable they were with their pre-finalization contact with the birth mother:
  - 19 (43%) were uncomfortable, and only 6 of these 19 went on to report post-finalization visits.
  - 11 (25%) were comfortable, and 9 of these 11 went on to report post-finalization visits.
  - 14 (32%) had mixed feelings, and all but one reported post-finalization contact.
- Of the 31 families that reported how comfortable they were with their post-finalization contact with the birth mother:
  - 5 (16%) were uncomfortable, 11 (36%) were comfortable, and 15 (48%) had mixed feelings.

# Adoptive Parents Perceptions of Contact

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– Most liked about contact:

- Children's right as part of their heritage (53% at pre-finalization and 81% at post-finalization)

– Most disliked aspect of contact:

- Adoptive parents worry because the birth mother is troubled or acts inappropriately (49% at pre-finalization and 45% at post-finalization).

# Reasons that Adoptive Parents Support Contact

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- Adoptive parent’s empathy for birth mother and focus child
  - “I put myself in [her] place and her birth mother’s place and I would think if I had a child out there I’d want to know something...and if I had a birth family out there I would want to hear from them. So that’s why I did it...[When asked] I always just explain, ‘If you were in this situation, what would you want?’ ”  
[Contact consists of letters sent to the agency and forwarded to the adoptive parent.]



# Reasons that Adoptive Parents Support Contact

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- 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 them.”  
[A family with post-placement meetings a few times a year.]

# Adoptive Parents' Perceptions of Benefits of Contact for Child

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- Focus child is beginning to understand his birth mother's addiction and how it impacts her behavior.
- Although child acts out after receiving a letter from her birth mother, “She appreciates it. She knows that [her birth mother] hasn't forgotten her.”
- Birth mother was able to tell the focus child she was sorry about the child's maltreatment.

## Families in Contact Post-Finalization (n=33)

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- This group includes 29 families who were in contact with one or both birth parents pre-finalization and an additional 4 families whose contact with birth parent(s) began after finalization.

# Negative Experience with Post-Finalization Contact

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- “[Focus child] needs to keep that contact. So for her emotionally I think it was a good thing...if I could, I’d go back and completely erase the open adoption so that she [birth mother] had no rights to her [focus child] whatsoever....I’m just sorry that it continued because what her birth mother was given, her visitations and her telephone calls and everything could have been very positive. Instead they turned out to be very negative because she says things and does things, and she would never follow up on them.” [Birth mother has a substance abuse problem.]

# Positive Experience with Post-Finalization Contact

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- The focus child is old enough to remember names of family members and wanted to make contact. Adoptive mother was able to make de-identified contact with a birth family member through a PO box. Contact evolved and at the time of the interview, consisted of several meetings a year in public places with birth mother and many other family members.

# Experiences with Contact in Adoption

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**Families in Contact with Other Birth Family  
Members but Not Birth Parents  
(n=60)**

# Contact with Other Birth Family Members, but Not Birth Parents\*

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- 49 (82%) of families reported contact with siblings
- 20 (33%) of families reported contact with extended maternal relatives (such as aunts and uncles)
- 15 (25%) of families reported contact with maternal grandmother
- 6 (10%) of families reported contact with maternal grandfather
- 4 (7%) of families reported contact with paternal grandmother
- 1 (2%) of families reported contact with paternal grandfather
- 3 (5%) of families reported contact with extended paternal relatives (such as aunts and uncles)

\* *Note:* Groups do not total to 100% because families could have reported being in contact with multiple other birth family members.

# Families in Contact with Siblings (n=49)

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- Of the 46 families that reported how frequently they had contact with siblings, 11 (24%) reported frequent contact, 21 (46%) reported infrequent contact, and 14 (30%) reported a mix of frequent and infrequent contact that varied by sibling(s).
- Of the 48 families that reported how comfortable they were with their contact with siblings:
  - 20 (42%) were comfortable
  - 4 (8%) were uncomfortable
  - 24 (50%) had mixed feelings, sometimes varying by sibling(s).
- The top concern about contact with siblings was that the adoptive parent wanted to establish more contact.



# Families with No Birth Parent Contact: Theme Groups\* (n=60 families)

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– Primary reasons for no contact with birth parents:

- Birth parent(s) not interested in contact / whereabouts unknown (n=28)
- Child never met or knew birth parent(s) (n=26)
- Birth parent(s) troubled (n=19)
- Safety concerns (n=18)

\*Theme groups were determined by looking at reasons for termination of parental rights and information in the interview to explain why families had no contact.

# Families with No Contact: Theme Group Safety Concerns/Dangerous (n=18)

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- One birth parent incarcerated.
- Drug use by one or both birth parents.
- Adoptive child is ‘terrified’ of one or both birth parents.
- Cycle of violence or sexual abuse in the child’s birth family.
- Adopted child does not want contact with one or more birth parents.
- Birth mother has been ordered by the court not to maintain contact with child.

# Adoptive Parent Perspectives on Contact with Other Family Members

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- “[Child’s] maternal grandparents have been very involved with our family from the beginning. And their maternal grandparents have taken on all of our children as their own grandchildren and really include them all as a family.”

# Adoptive Parent Perspectives on Contact: Safety Concerns/Dangerous Theme Group

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- “I don’t have a problem at all with [child] staying in contact with her brother and sister. With her parents having such a violent past, no, I wouldn’t really be for that.”

# Adoptive Parent Perspectives on Contact: Birth Parents Not Interested in Contact/Whereabouts Unknown

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- “[Child’s] mother is deceased and father just walked off. One day he just said he was through. He just gave up his rights.”

# Adoptive Parent Perspectives on Contact: Birth Parents Unable to Care for Child

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- “Her birth parents are in the city. In reading the report, the social workers felt like the father was hardly a part of [child’s] life anyway since he was an illegal, and also was in jail off and on...the mother was almost homeless and they felt like it was going to be all she could do just to take care of herself.”

# Families with No Contact

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**Families who were Not in Contact with Any  
Birth Family Members  
(n=46)**

## Families with No Contact (n=46 families)

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- 46 families had no contact with any of the focus child's birth family (except siblings placed with them) or previous foster family members.
- 21 of these 46 focus children were placed with at least one sibling in the adoptive home.



# Families with No Contact (n=46 families\*)

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– Primary reasons for no contact with birth parents:

- Child never met or knew birth parent(s) (n=29)
- Birth parent(s) not interested in contact / whereabouts unknown (n=16)
- Birth parent(s) in prison (n=13)
- Birth parent(s) connected to someone adoptive parent will not / cannot allow child to contact (n=13)

\*Groups were determined by looking at reasons for termination of parental rights and information in the interview to explain why families had no contact.

# Adoptive Parent Perspectives on Contact

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- “The birth father is deceased. [Child] was removed from the home before he was two years old, actually around two years old. His biological mother was arrested for domestic violence and assaulting a police officer. And the domestic violence was against him [focus child].”

# Adoptive Parent Perspectives on Contact

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- “I think people who have open adoptions, from my experience, you know, watching the hell they went through with, whoo, it’s messy. It’s really messy. Because the children are caught between the old– the outside family and their rules and what they want, and the inside families would just come to visit, throw a couple gifts at them, and then want to control everything.”

# Adoptive Parent Perspectives on Contact

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- “I really think it would have helped a million times over if he would have had a birth sibling with him, but the mother disappeared with him and we haven’t heard from them since....He really misses his mother.”

# Next Steps for Openness Analysis

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## – Future Analyses:

1. Predictive model of post-finalization contact with birth parents.
2. Identify ways that adoptive parents manage birth family contact.
3. Investigate the relationship between birth parent and substance abuse and successful contact.
4. Explore how sibling contact further and how it varies depending on the contact relationship with birth parents.
5. Investigate contact with foster families and other important non-family members from the child's past.

# Practice Implications

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- Closed, confidential adoption is no longer seen as a best practice
- Need for pre-adoption education about options and benefits of open adoption
  - *Making open adoption work for you: A curriculum and trainer's guide* - Evidence-based training curriculum for parents considering open adoption

# Practice Implications

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- Need for agencies to tailor open adoption strategies to best meet the needs of the adoptive child(ren), adoptive family, and birth family
- Need for post-adoption counseling and assistance if problems arise
- Training on maintaining connections

# Challenges to Openness

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- Substance abusing birth parents
- Inconsistent visitation/broken promises to child
- Children's ability to relate to two families
- Birth parent issues – mental health/violence
- Adversarial court proceedings



# Promoting Safety in Openness

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- 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

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- 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.”

# Factors Contributing to Successful Open Adoptions

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- Shared focus on the adopted child's needs
- Honesty
- Self-awareness
- Communication
- Flexibility
- Clear Boundaries
- Compassionate, non-judgmental view

(Siegel, 2012)

# Adoptive Parents' Role

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- 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)

# Questions/Discussion

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## For Further Information, Contact:

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# AdoptUSKids

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