

**Contact or no contact after adoption:
what it means and how it affects
family life, attachment and identity**

Jacqueline M Dally

**This thesis is submitted for the degree of PhD
at the University of York
in the Department of Social Policy
and Social Work
in October 2006**

Abstract

This qualitative study examines contact between adoptive and birth families in the context of adoptive family life. It examines the meaning and perception of contact in adoptive families and its perceived advantages and disadvantages for the children's attachment and identity formation, comparing families with and without contact.

Attachment and identity theory was the theoretical framework for semi-structured interviews, relationship and identity games with the children, and observations of the children and parents together and separately. Attachment comes from trust developed from consistent care, interest, love and the meeting of physical and emotional needs; it is the core of well-formed identity. Identity comes from feeling lovable and worthwhile, and in this context from background information from adopters.

The sample was 10 adoptive families with 13 children with contact, and nine families with 12 children without contact. Eight children had face-to-face contact, 11 had indirect letterbox contact. All except one were now securely attached, although many had been insecure when placed because of neglect or abuse in their background.

The most important finding was the similarity between the two groups: 24 out of 25 children were securely attached and all but two had well-formed identity. The assumption that contact is a major influence on identity and attachment is not supported. The main influence was open, comfortable communication between adoptive parents and children, who could ask their parents anything.

At the time of contact half the adoptive mothers had feelings of despair, although they felt positive at other times. Fathers were less positive about contact. Boys were more sanguine about it than girls; girls felt more intensely, and some were angry with their birth mothers. A unique finding was that about half the older-placed children took as long to become securely attached as they had spent with their birth families and in care.

Contents

Chapters

- 1 Introduction 6**
- 2 The changing face of adoption 11**
- 3 Literature review 37**
- 4 Attachment and identity 77**
 - Attachment 80
 - Identity 99
- 5 Methodology 106**
- 6 Findings 140**
 - Contact 142
 - Attachment 168
 - Identity 184
 - Three further themes 209
- 7 Discussion 221**
 - Contact 221
 - Attachment 246
 - Identity 259
- 8 Conclusions and implications for practice 271**

Appendices 291

- 1 Letter to the adoption team leader 292
- 2 Letter to 156 adoptive families 294
- 3 Appeal for families with no contact 296
- 4 Sample letter to families with contact with whom I had worked 298
- 5 Letter after the summer party 299
- 6 Postal questionnaire: You and Your Children 300
- 7 Semi-structured interview schedule 302
- 8 Introductory letter to the children 309
- 9 Children's and young people's consent form 311
- 10 Identity game for children: Who Do You ...? 312
- 11 Crittenden's classifications of attachment and caregiving 313
- 12 Children's defensive strategies 315

Bibliography 316

List of tables

Table 1: Children with contact who were interviewed	143
Table 2: Contact: with whom, type of contact, and its frequency	144
Table 3: Children without contact who were interviewed	156
Table 4: Children with contact: time taken to become securely attached	209
Table 5: Children without contact: time taken to become securely attached	210
Table 6: Children with contact: age at placement	246
Table 7: Children without contact: age at placement	246
Table 8: Children with contact: probable type of abuse	246
Table 9: Children without contact: probable type of abuse	247

List of figures

Fig 1: A child's cycle of need	82
Fig 2: Patterns of attachment	90
Fig 3: The relationship game	129

Acknowledgements

I thank first and foremost the children, young people and their parents who were so generous with their time and enthusiasm and so open in telling me their stories.

At the university I thank my supervisor Margaret Bell for her support, guidance and detailed comments, particularly on the last lap; Ian Shaw for his inspiration in restoring my enthusiasm for methodology; Ian Sinclair for keeping me on the right track; Mike Stein for his encouragement; and my fellow students for listening and sharing, especially Adrian and Florence. I thank my former colleagues in the adoption team that helped me find my sample, for their invaluable help and inspiration.

I am grateful to my friends for their interest, support and understanding. My children John, Elizabeth and Duncan, and John's wife Lesley, were intrigued as well as very supportive.

Most of all I thank my partner Chris for his patience, passion and precision in proofreading, for his wholehearted encouragement, and for keeping the home fires burning and supper on the table.

Beth's poem

Beth's poem on the next page speaks for all the children. Thank you, Beth.

Page 7

Wednesday 11th April

I am glad to be myself because I
wouldn't have my mummy and daddy.

I am glad to be myself because

I wouldn't have my toys.

I am glad to be myself because I
wouldn't have my dog!

I am glad to be myself because I
wouldn't have my big garden.



Chapter 1

Introduction

Why I have chosen this topic rather than any other

I have chosen this topic because there has been little research in the field of adoption and contact in which children as well as their adoptive parents have had their views listened to. Earlier research such as Tizard (1977), Fratter (1991) and Quinton et al. (1998) concentrated on the views and experiences of adoptive parents, finding that they could cope with contact but not without some emotional difficulties. The research of Thomas et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002), Neil (2002, 2004), and Smith and Logan (2004) does include interviews with children, and generally supports my own findings. But there is no other research in Britain, that I am aware of, which has examined one group of families with contact and one without.

Legislation today provides for openness and contact, but without the presumption of contact. This is a far cry from the early years of closed adoption and the 'clean break', when the ultimate 'clean break' was sending children to Australia. Until the 1980s adoptions were generally closed. Since then contact has grown in extent and complexity and in its interest to practitioners, policymakers, the adoption circle members, academics, the public, the media, and judges. This complex field clearly needs further research, particularly on the children's perceptions of contact and what it means to them. So I hope my long-held ambition to carry out such research will add some useful findings for practitioners, adopters and children.

How this topic came to interest me

Whilst working in Children and Families teams I found myself increasingly being allocated young mothers who were struggling or unable to look after their children. In some cases the plan became adoption and it was my job to find a family for the children. Late in 1989 I was involved with a very young birthmother Nan and her twin daughters, and the plan evolved into adoption. She had no support from her former partner or her family and had a chaotic lifestyle. However, Nan was willing and able to give me information and photographs for the children's lifestory books,

which we worked on together. She became involved with family finding and chose the family, from three I had selected, for her girls, requesting an exchange of photographs and newsletters with them. The adopters, from another agency, had received no preparation for contact, as it was embryonic at this time. However, they agreed to send an annual letter and photographs through the local authority, but felt unable to receive photographs and news from Nan.

Meantime I moved from child care to the newly-formed local adoption team, and Nan's contact was our first piece of letterbox business, which the team leader and I set up. She and the team were much in favour of contact, and this was only the first of many informal contact agreements to be arranged. Nan came to the preparation groups for prospective adoptive parents, giving them her perspective and answering their questions. The majority of adopters found her presentation most helpful.

Direct contact, mainly between siblings and sometimes with grandmothers, was being considered and practised, but letterbox contact, mainly with birth mothers, was assumed to be the easier option. During my twelve years as an adoption social worker I became even more interested and involved in the complexities of contact, and how children, adoptive and birth parents coped with and were affected by this phenomenon.

Aims of the research

- To understand the significance and meaning of contact or of no contact for adoptive families, their attitudes to contact, and the value they place on it.
- To analyse how contact is perceived by the adopters and the children, whether as a help or a hindrance to the promotion and support of attachment relationships between adoptive parents and their adopted children, to the promotion of the children's identity, and to family life in general. And the same for children with no contact: to explore how this is perceived as a hindrance or a help and what it means to them and their families.
- To review the literature, so as to compare the findings of similar research with mine and to identify gaps in the research.

Research approach

I have used qualitative methodology to examine this sensitive, complex matter of contact in the context of family life and relationships. Attachment and identity theory are my frameworks for examining the children's attachments and identity formation. To explore the significance of contact or no contact to adoptive family life, attachment relationships, and the children's identity, I have used semi-structured interviews, observation checklists, a field diary, games for the children, and some attachment criteria, to answer my research questions, which follow.

Research questions

- What are family relationships, attachment and identity formation like in the two groups – one with contact and one without?
- What is the meaning and significance of contact or no contact to these adoptive parents and their children?
- Does contact promote attachment or identity?
- What are the differences and similarities between the two groups?
- What are the findings of similar research and what are the gaps in research?

Plan of the chapters

2 The changing face of adoption: from the 'clean break' to openness and contact

Chapter 2 first tells the history of contact and its legislation; defines and describes direct and indirect contact; and examines the benefits and detriments of contact identified by research. Then it looks at the debate about the pros and cons of contact between Ryburn and Quinton et al., and at the increasing caution of researchers about contact. Lastly it reviews the connections between contact, attachment and identity found by research.

3 Literature review

The literature review encompasses literature in the field of adoption and contact from Fratter (1996) through to Brodzinsky (2005). I have also used Tizard's seminal

study of 1977; many of her findings and her implications for practice are supported by later research.

I have also reviewed, and included, in chapter two the studies of: Mullender (1991), Ryburn (1992), Howe (1996), Triseliotis et al. (1997), Grotevant and McRoy (1998), Howe et al. (1999), Howe and Feast (2000), Sykes (2000), Rushton et al. (2001), and Triseliotis et al. (2005). One of these, Triseliotis et al. (1997), was used as an allround book on adoption which also encompassed openness. I have also used articles in my field from the journal *Adoption and Fostering* from 1984 to 2005.

4 Attachment and identity

Chapter 4 sets out my theoretical frameworks of attachment theory and identity theory. It summarises John Bowlby's theory, then examines the work of those who supported it and added to it: Michael Rutter, Mary Ainsworth, Mary Main, Pat Crittenden, and Dorothy Heard and Brian Lake. Identity theory is drawn mainly from Erikson, Triseliotis and Ryburn.

5 Methodology

The qualitative methodology and the process of the research are described in chapter 5, from the long and careful process of securing my sample, to the enjoyment and sheer exhaustion of the interviews, to the exhaustive analysis of the huge and rich accumulation of data. Grappling with causal effects was instructive. I conclude with the strengths and vulnerabilities of my study.

6 Findings

The findings in this chapter are supported by much of the literature referenced above. But I also present a few unique findings, such as the connection between a child's age at placement and the length of time the child takes to become securely attached. Some findings from the comparison of the two groups were notable and surprising: for instance, that the children in the group without contact had equally secure attachments and equally well-formed identity as the children in the group with contact.

7 Discussion

The findings are discussed in more detail in this chapter. In the light of them I look back at my hypotheses, and at my long-held beliefs about contact, about which I now have to be more careful and cautious.

8 Conclusions and implications for practice

My conclusions and some implications for practice are set out in the context of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, implemented on 30 December 2005, which provides (among other adoption measures) for post-adoption support to adoptive and birth families. It will be interesting to see the outcomes of this.

Chapter 2

The changing face of adoption: from the 'clean break' to openness and contact

Introduction

This chapter provides background information about contact in the past and in the present, reviews the benefits and disadvantages of contact which research has identified, and gives an overview of other research findings relevant to my own research. It covers these topics:

- The history of contact and its legislation.
- Openness and contact now.
- The definition of contact.
- Indirect contact, its nature and its processes.
- Direct contact, its nature and its processes.
- The benefits of contact for all concerned, as identified by research.
- The disadvantages of contact, as identified by research.
- The debate about the pros and cons of contact between Ryburn and Quinton et al.
- The increasing caution of researchers about contact.
- Connections between contact, attachment and identity found by research.

History of contact and its legislation

In the nineteenth century adoption was closed and secretive. But 'How secrecy came to be built into modern adoption legislation and into the adoption agencies' policy and practice is difficult to pinpoint' (Triseliotis et al. 1997: 68). This 'clean break' culture possibly originated around 1850, in the days of the Poor Law, when 'adoption' was common but informal, with no legal transference of parental responsibilities from birth parents to the new carers. Children who were orphaned or abandoned, or had been separated from what was thought to be the bad influence of their irresponsible parents, were placed in workhouses or boarded out with foster carers living at a distance to discourage contact. The ultimate clean break was for children to be sent off to Canada or Australia.

Voluntary organisations such as Barnardo's and the National Children's Home set up orphanages and care homes for children. The founder of NCH in 1869, Thomas Bowman Stephenson, motivated by his concern for suffering and injustice and by his Christian faith, wanted to avoid replicating the Poor Law institutions, and set up small family-type homes where six children would be looked after by a housemother and housefather. Nevertheless NCH and Barnardo's were involved with child emigration to Canada and Australia. This practice was rooted in a shortage of human labour in these countries, as well as in the desire to promote a better life for some deprived children (Bridge and Swindells 2003: 2). These children were expected to work hard and were generally treated as second best (Tizard 1977). Whilst NCH attempted to ensure that supervision was carried out in the homes in these distant countries, they did not consider until much later the loss and trauma suffered by children and the effects on their wellbeing and identity (Philpot 1994: 8).

The First World War resulted in a great number of orphans needing homes and led to more *de facto* adoptions, so that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was much pondering over the rights of birth parents. Even though 'adopters' had brought up a child, the birth parents could claim the child back when he or she was old enough to earn a living. To legalise *de facto* adoptions the Adoption of Children Act 1926 enabled the birth parents to transfer their rights and duties to another person.

Legislation was developed to protect children from the stigma of illegitimacy (Legitimacy Act 1926), as adopted children were primarily babies of unmarried mothers. Consent to the making of an adoption order could be given by the birth mother knowing the identity of the applicant. Birth and adoptive parents could meet in court for the granting of the adoption order, and although contact did not continue there was this one significant meeting between the two sets of parents (Triseliotis et al. 1997: 69). But this was no longer possible after the Adoption of Children Act 1949, which protected adoptive parents from interference by birth parents, and encouraged the prevalence of the closed model of adoption.

This culture continued into the 1970s, supported by Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1973 and 1980) who advocated a clean break from birth parents to allow children to attach to their adoptive parents. Adoptive parents were told to treat the child as their own, as though born in 'lawful wedlock' (Adoption Act 1976 s39). What Bridge and Swindells (2003: 17) term the 'legal transplant' was not conducive to openness and

contact. In the same vein, adoption files from this era reveal that birth mothers were told: this is your secret forever, get on with your life, forget about this child. Consequently the mental health of many of these mothers suffered.

Initially the belief in confidentiality and in no contact was supported by the Houghton Committee. But their report, influenced by the research of Triseliotis (1973) which they had commissioned, showed that in fact access worked well, and they recommended that adopted adults in England and Wales should have access to their original birth records (Departmental Committee on the Adoption of Children 1972).

The Children Act 1975 (s51) gave adopted people the right at eighteen, after at least one counselling session with a social worker, to have a copy of their original birth certificate. This counselling revealed that adopted people wanted and needed information about their origins. This section of the Act was based on the study of Triseliotis (1973) carried out in Scotland where people had had this right since the Adoption of Children (Scotland) Act 1930. Some had been given information by their adopters, while others had felt their adopters were uncomfortable with the subject of their background. Adopted people wanted the kind of information that is available to most of us in an ongoing and everyday way through living in our biological families (Triseliotis 1973).

The revelations of these adoptees and the 1973 study of adoptees by Triseliotis began to influence the practice of openness from the 1980s. Contrary to the secretive closed history of adoption, some contact had always been around, as shown by references in old adoption files to letters and photos sent by adopters to birth mothers, and shown also by studies such as Triseliotis et al. (1997).

The Adoption Act 1976 imposed a general duty to give first consideration to the welfare of the child. This was in spite of the generally closed attitudes in adoption circles, including among the judiciary, and in spite of the dilemma that, if a child needed contact with birth parents, was adoption appropriate? During the 1970s and 1980s the courts granted contact in several cases, 'but the court always expressed itself with hesitancy and dubbed the facts "exceptional". Access was only allowed in accordance with terms already agreed by the respective parties' (Bridge and Swindells 2003: 17). So openness was evolving under the influence of the 1976 Act, and was further influenced by research literature.

Sawbridge (1991) found that many birth mothers would like periodical information about the child they had had adopted, but also that there were periods in their lives when they would have been unable to cope with such information. However, if information was lodged with the adoption agency they could collect it when it felt alright for them to do so. Birth mothers felt they had acted responsibly in placing their child for adoption, and would continue to act responsibly by not interfering, not upsetting the child, and keeping the child's interests paramount. Literature such as *Half a Million Women* (Howe et al. 1992) gave a voice to the pain and grief of birth mothers who had given up a child for adoption, and this began to influence the practice of openness.

The main impact of the Children Act 1989 on adoption was an imposed presumption of contact with children in care. The law considered that adoption and contact may be compatible, but many of the judiciary remained cautious. The Act also recognised birth parents' entitlements; it gave them the right to maintain involvement in their children's lives and the right to give consent to adoption plans for children unless overridden by the court. The Act also enabled birth parents to put their names on the contact register. So both morally and legally birth parents' rights were being addressed, and the pendulum had swung from secretive and closed adoption to openness.

Openness and contact now

While adoption with contact is relatively new (Triseliotis et al. 1997, Quinton et al. 1997, Smith and Logan 2004), practitioners and researchers confirm that it is now the norm. The ethos of open adoption with contact is the prevalent one, and the practice is for widespread contact for nearly all children. Indirect contact (explained below) is the preferred option. The practice of openness by adoption agencies has transcended policy and procedures (Smith and Logan 2004: 18-19). Consequently adopters have come to accept openness as beneficial and also as part of the package of adoption (Fratton 1996, Macaskill 2002).

However, researchers advocate caution because of its immaturity, and say that we do not yet know enough about what works and what does not work among the complex arrangements and variables involved in contact. Notably, there are problems with reaching unequivocal conclusions from the available research. Some adults and children benefit from contact, whilst others do not. Smith and Logan (2004: 33) say, 'The outstanding problem is that we remain relatively unclear about the *conditions* under which contact is experienced as beneficial by those involved

and which are likely to differentially influence longterm outcomes for children' (their italics). McWhinnie (1994: 7) writes that open adoption 'has become a kind of ideology against which no arguments are permissible. I have found no research evidence as to its genuine long-term advisability and certainly none as to its outcome.'

The Adoption and Children Act (ACA) 2002, implemented on 30 December 2005, remains clear that the welfare of the child is paramount. However, there is no 'presumption' of contact, after a placement order is granted, and significantly the duty in the Children Act 1989 to promote contact no longer applies. Judicial decisions after the 1989 Act indicated that courts were most reluctant to make a contact order that was against the wishes of the adopters. Notice has been taken of access arrangements in divorced and reconstituted families, which tend to work badly and become adversarial. As a result of this and of the ACA 2002, the current attitude among the judiciary is that generally the adoption agencies are best suited to deal with contact matters.

This informal arrangement may indeed be more appropriate to birth and adoptive parents, as some studies indicate (Macaskill 2002, Neil 2004, Smith and Logan 2004). But if contact is informal, it must rely on the practice of social workers to promote it and on the willingness of adopters to maintain it. It requires the best possible knowledge and understanding of contact on the part of agencies and practitioners.

The sections in the ACA 2002 pertinent to contact and to information-seeking are discussed in the concluding chapter, with implications for practice.

Contact: definition, practicalities and process

Contact may be defined as any kind of communication that adopted children and their adoptive parents have with the children's birth families, including parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, and uncles, or with significant others such as former foster carers or friends. Contact is normally classified by social workers as indirect or direct.

Indirect contact

Most indirect contact is in the form of an exchange of documents between the families, usually an annual letter. The documents exchanged may also include photographs, children's drawings and notes, copies of school reports, cards for Christmas or Easter or birthdays or Mother's Day, and videos. Gifts and phone calls may also be exchanged. The recipient of the letter from the adoptive family is usually the birth mother; other recipients may be grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles. A letter is usually sent annually, or less commonly twice a year.

The exchange is managed by the adoption agency that placed the child, by means of a letterbox system. The local authority and the placing agency at the placement planning meeting usually complete the informal contract for contact, specifying whom the contact is between and when it is to take place. Contracts are sent out to all concerned, with a copy to be signed and returned and one to be retained. The agency then acts as an intermediary for those involved. The purposes of the letterbox system are to maintain confidentiality (for instance, of the adopters' address) and sometimes to prevent the passing of inappropriate and upsetting messages.

Practice varies enormously between agencies. The procedure just described is from the local authority agency from which my sample was drawn. Some agencies have very clear informal contracts which are sent out to all participants, who may receive reminder letters or telephone calls that contact is imminent. Some agencies expect birth and adoptive families to contact them, confirm their address, and confirm that they still wish to receive letters. Sometimes letters are screened and sometimes not. Gifts and vouchers from the birth family may or may not be acceptable.

Existing research suggests that indirect contact is not an easy option (Neil 2004: 53, 63). It is complex, and changes as the needs of each participant change. For instance, the child's needs are different at different life stages; during adolescence the need is for further information about her background to help with identity formation. Indirect contact can cause both practical and emotional difficulties for all participants, child and adopters and birth family and social workers, and takes its toll on them all. Letters and celebration cards often do not arrive on time; they may contain inappropriate emotional material; photographs that were promised are not sent; unsuitable gifts disappoint and frustrate the children. Information is often not reciprocated by birth parents, and when it is, it often diminishes over time.

Direct contact

Direct contact takes the form of face-to-face meetings between the families. The meetings may be quarterly, monthly, annual or occasional. There may have been only ever a single meeting, often before or in the early days of the placement. The meetings may or may not include the child. Most direct contact is between siblings, and then with grandparents, and less often with birth mothers. Contact is sometimes supervised by the adoption agency, but more often is managed by the adoptive families, who also often do the travelling. It may be at a neutral venue or at home. But contact may also evolve between the families, who may come to consider it like a meeting between extended family for birthdays and other celebrations.

With direct contact each of the participants has the advantage of meeting the other. Many myths and preconceptions can be seen to be misconceptions, and questions may be asked and answered. Even a one-event meeting is worthwhile (Triseliotis 2000: 85). Such a meeting might support and promote more comfortable indirect contact. It may even be useful where continuing contact is not in the child's best interests, when its continuance might retraumatise the child and impede attachment with adopters, as they may be considered unable to keep the child safe (Howe and Steele 2004: 220).

Adult influence

The behaviour of the adults in relation to contact of both kinds has much influence on its success or failure. The outcome is affected by where they meet and how they interact with each other and the children. And in the case of letters, the outcome is affected by how they write and by the give and take of information, photographs and other documents. Grotevant and McRoy (1998) conclude that openness is an evolving process, and one of give and take by all the participants. Considering the variables involved, it is remarkable that it takes place and that in many cases it works.

Benefits of contact

It is agreed that the purpose of contact is to gain information for the child's benefit (Triseliotis et al. 1997, Quinton et al. 1997, Neil and Howe 2004, Smith and Logan 2004). This is paramount.

Contact may benefit the child in these ways. It may:

- help her make sense of why she needed a new family.
- provide physical, medical and emotional information, which in turn promotes self-esteem and the sense of physical and social identity.
- show that the birth relatives still love and are interested in the child.
- remove feelings of guilt, responsibility, loss and rejection.
- give birth parents the opportunity to explain their inability to care and to apologise for abuse and neglect – which helps remove the child's bad feelings.
- remove myths and fantasy, idealisation or demonisation.
- enable the child to ask in letters, or to see, how their birth relatives are getting on.
- help the child attach to new parents, as permission to attach is often given verbally, non-verbally or in letters, and shows the birth parents' acceptance of the adoption and adopters.
- retain existing meaningful relationships and make others with previously unknown siblings.

Information from contact may assist adoptive parents to:

- explain to their child the circumstances of her adoption and her genealogy.
- gain feelings of entitlement, that is, of being the 'real' parents, by seeing, hearing and understanding why the birth family was unable to parent the child.
- gain the birth family's permission to parent.
- discount and clarify fantasies, preconceptions and misunderstandings.
- acknowledge the difference between adoptive and biological parenting.
- come to terms with infertility, a process helped by the benefits above.

Contact may help the birth parents and relatives to:

- see or hear that their child is alive and well, and making progress.
- give and get information.
- give explanations for their relinquishment or inability to parent and apologise to the child for any neglect or abuse.
- gain a sense of the adoptive parents and the kind of people and parents they are.
- give permission to the adopters to parent their child.
- come to terms with the loss of their child.

Some of the helpful attributes of adoptive parents may be as much a consequence of their character as a benefit of contact. These attributes, considered by researchers and practitioners alike, include: empathy for the birth parents; differentiating between adoptive and biological parenting; a sense of security, that the child really belongs in their family. These adopters have already decided they are able to parent someone else's child and may consider that contact will benefit the child. So they already encompass openness and empathy and confidence. Smith and Logan (2004: 33) support this view.

Disadvantages of contact

Two main disadvantages are put forward by Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1973 and 1980): interference by the birth parents can confuse the child, and maintaining a link with the birth parents will prevent attachment to the adoptive parents. Studies such as Fratter (1996), Triseliotis (2000) and Brodzinsky (2005) feel that the child can attach to both, but would agree with Goldstein, Freud and Solnit of the child's need to know who the psychological parents are, and that it is the adopters who do the job of parenting and become their family and give them a secure base through childhood and beyond.

Other disadvantages of contact are also put forward:

- Children's sense of identity is harmed.
- It is a kind of injustice to birth mothers.
- It is complex.
- Much hard work may be needed to get it going and to maintain it satisfactorily.
- Emotional stress is created for all concerned.
- It is not appropriate for every child. For instance, children who have been maltreated may be traumatised again by contact with the maltreating parent, and this may impair their attachment to their adoptive parents.
- Birth parents may give inappropriate messages or promises during contact.
- The longterm outcomes of contact are unknown.

The continuing debate about contact

Ryburn v Quinton et al.

Debate continues between academics and researchers about the benefits and disadvantages of contact. The main debate is between Murray Ryburn, and David Quinton and his colleagues.

Ryburn contends that direct contact is the most beneficial for children, asserting that 'the research studies suggest that with indirect contact children's information needs are begging to be met but with direct contact their questions are more likely to be met at a level that's satisfying' (Ryburn 1998: 60). Ryburn was impressed by the success of adoptions with direct contact in New Zealand (Ryburn 1992) and by US adoptions.

However, the New Zealand adoptions tended to be those with kinship or community ties, and the US open adoptions were generally of young babies relinquished by birth mothers, who had much more control over the choice of adopters and more involvement in the adoption process (Triseliotis et al. 1997: 72). Notably, British adoptions since the 1980s and especially now include many older children with neglectful and abusive backgrounds, not relinquished but removed by the courts.

Ryburn's enthusiasm for contact is influential, but he does not flag up the negative factors: its complexity, the immense amount of hard work it demands, the emotional stresses for all concerned and their changing needs (Quinton et al. 1998, Rushton et al. 2001, Macaskill 2002). Neil (2004: 63) says that even 'indirect contact is not an easy option.' Nor does Ryburn point out that contact is not appropriate for every child, something which is highlighted in many studies (including Crittenden 1995: 379, 400, and quotes in my attachment chapter; Quinton et al. 1998: 69; Thomas et al. 1999: 94; Rushton et al. 2001: 88).

This position is further supported by Howe and Steele (2004: 220): 'Permanently placed children who have suffered severe maltreatment may be re-traumatised when they have contact with the maltreating parent. Children may therefore experience the permanent carers as unable to protect them and keep them safe. This will interfere with the child's ability to develop a secure attachment with their new carers.' So although contact of some kind may be appropriate and advantageous for many children at some stage, each child and each adoptive and birth family needs to be assessed carefully and consulted.

Ryburn (1998) repeats many of his earlier beliefs, but does concede that for some children contact is ill-advised (p65). He focuses on birth mothers, not on the needs of the child, using research from 1980. He goes on to attack social workers for not doing enough preventative work, for not considering kinship care, and for not listening to the wishes and feelings of children. This last deficiency is supported by Thomas et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002) and Smith and Logan (2004), and is addressed by the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

Ryburn then goes on to accuse Quinton and his colleagues of being biased and following their own beliefs. But we note that many of the references that Ryburn makes are to his own work. He is also hard on adoptive parents, saying that they are implacable and oppositional, although earlier he points out that it is often they who initiate contact. Generally my overview of the literature below and in the literature review chapter found that almost all adoptive parents are aware of the benefits of contact, and do it to gain information for their children and to keep the door open for possible later contact. While there is some later reservations about contact by adoptive parents, there is no reference that I am aware of to their implacability.

Quinton et al. (1997: 411) acknowledge that contact 'can work amicably' and can be influential for children's wellbeing. On the other hand, they are cautious and highlight the embryonic state of contact and of our knowledge about its benefits, saying, 'In our present state of knowledge it is seriously misleading to think that what we know about contact is at a level of sophistication to allow us to make confident assertions about the benefits to be gained from it regardless of family circumstances and relationships. At least in the case of permanent placements the social experiment that is currently underway needs to be recognised as an experiment, not as an example of evidence-based practice.'

In their response to Ryburn (1998), Quinton and his colleagues (Quinton, Selwyn et al. 1998b) point out the methodological difficulties with small or unrepresentative samples, and with applying appropriate measures and assessments to understand the process underlying associations in the data. They find (as I do in the debate above) that Ryburn's general conclusions about the outcomes of contact are too positive; they say that they are akin to the outcomes of the caucus race in Alice's Wonderland – 'everyone wins and all must have prizes' (p351).

Quinton and his colleagues in general are concerned about the lack of longitudinal research into the consequences of contact in the longer term, and about the difficulties of research into such a complex phenomenon as contact, with many variables such as contact arrangements, the child, the adoptive parents, the birth parents and relatives, and the issues and changing needs of these participants over time. They found that adopters' initial enthusiasm for contact waned; they still did it for their child, but were themselves concerned about its outcome. Quinton and his colleagues quite probably base their own concern on their research findings (such as Quinton et al. 1998: 72) that even when the parents were happy with the progress of contact, their views changed when birth parents during contact gave their children mixed or inappropriate messages or made unfulfillable promises. Worries were also voiced by adopters about how contact would work out in the longterm.

Quinton and his colleagues are much exercised by the evidence, or the lack of it, for contact in general and in the longterm and for justifying the swing of the pendulum towards contact for all children. They ask us to consider appropriate and necessary questions: about how much we really know about the effects of the many contact arrangements for children, each of whom is unique, and who have various, usually detrimental backgrounds; about the impact on the adoptive and birth parents; and about the support they need before and after placement. The complexity is great, and they are right to be cautious.

Increasing caution about contact

Keen advocates of contact are becoming more cautious. This becomes clear from comparing some researchers' earlier stance on contact with their more recent views.

Fratter (1991: 53) felt that children benefited from contact. More recently she remains positive about the benefits, but she is also forthright about the extreme difficulties experienced by some of her sample: 'While attitudes concerning the possibility of greater openness in adoption changed significantly in the UK since the 1980s, there remains considerable uncertainty about the maintenance of contact, particularly face-to-face contact after adoption' (Fratter 1996: 7).

Taking into account the available research evidence Triseliotis et al. (1997: 89) conclude that if the participants in contact are positive, constructive, without acrimony and recriminations, there is no reason why contact should be harmful to the child. Indeed the maintenance of meaningful links, particularly for older children,

appears beneficial to their sense of identity and self-esteem and to their awareness of their genealogical background and the circumstances of their adoption. However, Triseliotis, Feast and Kyle (2005) in a new study of adoption search and reunion, though they repeat the above, also point out: 'All the gains reported from contact and reunion should not detract from the intensity of the feelings experienced by many members of the triangle, the complications that at times arose, the anxieties many went through and the continued fluidity and changing nature of relationships giving rise to new anxieties and to a fair amount of stress' (p379). The authors question whether this could have been prevented if, as now, adoptions were open from the start. Perhaps my findings will give some answers here.

Thomas et al. (1999) aimed to listen to the voice of children and gain knowledge and understanding from the children's views and experiences of adoption and contact. They assert that contact can be important for those children who have been abused and neglected, to allow birth parents to explain and apologise for this, perhaps by a letter or in a one-event meeting. On the other hand they found that generally the children who had been abused did not want contact. They seem even-handed about contact, but also show some caution.

Neil (2002) is strongly in favour of contact. She found that young adopted children cope well with direct contact with birth parents, though previously contact was considered more appropriate for older-placed children with an established meaningful relationship with a birth relative. This position is supported by Triseliotis et al. (1997), Lowe et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002) and Rushton et al. (2001). This research seems to call for more direct contact for young children. In 2004, Neil remains positive about contact but is also cautious, pointing out the challenges of indirect contact, and saying '... from the research presented in this book that there are no straightforward answers to broad questions about whether or not contact will be of benefit to specific children in particular permanent placements' (Neil 2004: 224).

Smith and Logan (2004) are generally positive about adoption and direct contact: '... our research leads us to the conclusion that adoption can, in appropriate circumstances, act to promote and sustain contact rather than to frustrate it' (p87). However, they also consider the impact of contact on all the participants, particularly the children. Their very first page cautions, 'Few children nowadays are placed for adoption without any form of contact planned with birth relatives, and professional practitioners are increasingly advocating the value of direct rather than indirect

contact. Practice has outstripped evidence in this respect and not enough is known about how contact arrangements actually work out, particularly for older children adopted from state care. Such children have often experienced neglect and abuse, and they have frequently been adopted without parental agreement.'

Thus it may be that the cautionary and careful studies of Quinton and his colleagues have influenced other researchers, particularly in considering the unknown consequences of longterm contact for all those involved, especially the children. Quinton, speaking at a conference in 2004 (the 6th Annual Fostering and Adoption Conference of the United Bristol Healthcare Trust), said that there are no data from which to draw conclusions on the balance of benefit and harm from contact. But there was also no evidence that lack of contact had serious longterm consequences. He and his colleagues have also pointed out the limitations of methodologies used, such as the small samples, and the difficulties of taking into account the many variables involved in contact arrangements and in its participants.

Overview of the research on contact, attachment and identity

To conclude this chapter I take an overview of the main findings of research on contact, attachment and identity in relation to each other and to my research questions.

Adoptive parents think contact is beneficial

All but a few adoptive parents are aware of the benefits of contact, though many have worries about it at some time or another. Its purposes particularly are to gain information to promote their children's identity, and to keep the door open for future contact. They are also aware of benefits for themselves and the birth relatives, which are outlined above. A very few adopters feel that contact benefits only the birth relatives. These findings are in Fratter (1991: 53 and 1996), Ryburn (1998), Quinton et al. (1998: 68), Grotevant and McRoy (1998), Thomas et al. (1999: 109, 138), Macaskill (2002), Neil (2002: 18), Smith and Logan (2004: 93), and Brodzinsky (2005).

For example, Fratter (1991: 53) found that although about a fifth of the families had some problems with contact, all but one adoptive family felt their children had gained some benefit from contact or from links with the birth parents. However, six of her 22 families had some reservations about contact.

Another example is Smith and Logan's finding (2004: 93): 'One of the factors that motivates adopters to maintain post-adoption contact is that they think there are advantages in doing so. Adoptive parents in our sample were able to identify advantages for participants from at least one side of the adoption triangle.' Over half identified advantages for themselves and their children and the birth relatives; about a third of adopters felt they gained little from contact, but it had advantages for their children and the birth family; only three adopters thought contact advantaged only the birth relatives.

Parents and children are happy, neutral or divided about contact

Parents and children generally described contact in terms of being happy with it, or said that it was neutral for them, or that they had both positive and negative thoughts and feelings about it. Generally children and their own adoptive parents shared the same views, except in Grotevant and McRoy (1998), discussed below.

(a) Parents' views

Quinton et al. (1998: 68) found that generally adoptive parents thought that contact was helpful or neutral in effect, with their views changing according to events in the latest contact. For example, adopters felt contact was unhelpful when birth parents gave the children mixed or inappropriate messages or promises they could not fulfil, and worried about this. Hill et al. (1989: 6) found that although most adoptive parents agreed to contact in principle, several retained mixed views about its appropriateness. Most found little positive in it, and were relieved when it was not taken up. Over half the adoptive mothers in Sykes (2000) were less than comfortable with contact, but despite this said that they were committed to continuing it. Adoptive parents generally tend to have more positive attitudes to sibling contact than to contact with birth parents.

It is notable that, whilst contact is central in all of the research reviewed here and is much reviewed in the next chapter, the authors' focus and perspective are different from mine. For example, Quinton et al. (1998), while interested in contact, were more concerned about the strength and tenacity of the relationship between the children and parents, and how it affects parental satisfaction and holding on through difficulties. They were not, as I am, concerned with the children's identity formation.

Adoptive parents carried out contact for the sake of their children's identity. But even when happy with it they had some concerns and worries about how it would work out in the longterm and its ultimate effects. Macaskill (2002) supports this.

Adoptive parents often take on open arrangements regardless. Grotevant and McRoy (1998: 73-4) quote an adoptive father as saying, 'I don't know of any [prospective adoptive parents] who would say, "No, I wouldn't do it," if it has to be an open [adoption].' The authors go on to explain that some adoptive and birth parents in their study accepted openness arrangements because they were unaware of other options or because their wish to complete the placement overshadowed the consideration of openness. Others played a passive role, and the remainder were proactive in ensuring that specific arrangements were in place.

A powerful factor influencing adoptive parents' views on contact and openness was the attitudes and ethos of the adoption agency and social workers involved. This was found to be the case by virtually all the research reviewed (Fratter 1991, Ryburn 1994, Grotevant and McRoy 1998, Quinton et al. 1998, Thomas et al. 1999, Macaskill 2002, Neil and Howe 2004, and Smith and Logan 2004). Fratter (1991), for example, found that the agencies which promoted contact believed in its benefits, that it provided information and reassurance about the birth family's interest and wellbeing, and consequently promoted the children's positive identity. Conversely, agencies that did not promote contact had little experience of it, believing that adoptive and birth parents needed protection from stress at this emotional time in their lives. More recently, the adopters in Smith and Logan's (2004) study experienced a clear expectation of contact from their agencies. While they appreciated the benefits of contact for their children, frequently they were unable to express their concerns in case this affected their approval or any subsequent placement (p85). This supports another general finding, that adopters felt pressured into contact and unable to voice their concerns, and this in turn may affect the neglect of these issues in preparation and later support.

(b) Children's views

Generally researchers found that some children were happy about contact; many had mixed feelings; and many wanted more, especially with their siblings (Thomas et al. 1999, Macaskill 2002, Smith and Logan 2004).

Children's perceptions of contact in Grotevant and McRoy (1998) were often different from those of their parents. Some children were unaware of the contact arrangements, or that there was information from their birth parents, which was being kept for later. In a small number of the fully disclosed (that is, direct contact) adoptions children had no information. Some children also differed in their

perception of the amount of information given by their adopters. They perceived it as less, while their adopters thought it was more (p75).

Thirty-eight children (and no parents) were consulted by Thomas et al. (1999). Twelve had direct contact with birth family members, and some said it made them happy; half said they were content with contact arrangements; five wanted more contact, and one wanted it reduced. Of the 26 children who had no contact 12 were accepting of this; seven had a desire for contact with one or both their birth parents, and seven clearly did not want any contact. Six of the 17 children who met with their siblings wanted more frequent contact. Of the ten children who were not having contact with their siblings, six accepted this; two would like to establish some sibling contact, and one was relieved not to have it. So generally the children with contact were happy with it; the main dissatisfaction was wanting more. Of the children without any contact, most accepted this, but some wished it could be established.

Fifty-seven percent of the children in Macaskill's study (2002) were both positive and negative about contact; 25% were very negative; 12% very positive; and 6% were indifferent. Thus the majority of children had some worries about contact some of the time. One boy said, 'I didn't like my birth mother. She was a horrible mother: but I think I still loved her.' This is an example of the conflicting feelings that many of the children in this study and others had about their birth parents. In this study disruption occurred in 10 placements out of 68, and in six of these contact was said to be the key factor by the social workers, foster carers or adopters (p73).

Neil (2004) found that most children in her study said they were glad they were having contact. When asked what was good about contact they expressed this in terms of it being good to see their birth family members (p78). A few of the children in this sample had mixed feelings about having contact. All in the sample were placed early, at under eighteen months.

In general children enjoyed the treats and outings and seeing people whom they looked like. Researchers and adopters also noted that relationships with birth relatives were usually more distant than the biological connection suggested. For example, birth mothers were described as like aunts or friends (Triseliotis et al. 1997, Macaskill 2002, Neil 2004). This is consistent with studies of adopted people who search for and were often reunited with their birth relatives (Howe and Feast 2000, Triseliotis et al. 2005). These studies found that the majority of adopted folk were not searching in order to make a relationship within their birth family, although

sometimes this did happen; what they wanted was information and to fit in missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. Their relationships with their adoptive family remained strong and the most salient.

Preparation is needed for contact

Several studies (Thomas et al. 1999, Macaskill 2002, Smith and Logan 2004, and Neil 2004) emphasise the need for good, appropriate preparation for contact and ongoing post-adoption support, to look after the changing needs of families involved in the complex phenomenon of contact. 'Preparatory work with prospective adopters must do more than simply attempting to persuade them that children need contact. It must anticipate the kinds of emotional and management issues that we have identified and prepare them for responding to these. Sensitive work with children is necessary to hear and understand their feelings about separation and contact in individual cases. Similarly work with birth families must look beyond material facts such as birth parents' agreement to adoption. It must consider, with them, their feelings about adapting to a changed familial role and their willingness and ability to relinquish or modify previous expectations and relationships' (Smith and Logan 2004: 182).

Attachment between adopted children and adoptive parents

In general, earlier attachments to birth parents are not an obstacle to the formation of attachment between adopted children and their adoptive parents. Barth and Berry (1988: 171) say, 'If those [earlier] attachments are positive but not strong, children and adoptive families may be able to incorporate them with little effect on their own relationship. Open adoption provides such opportunities. If the attachment to birth or prior foster parents is more intense, then efforts to facilitate disengagement may be necessary.' The authors support the message of attachment theory that early positive attachment is an advantage for later relationships, but that intense earlier relationships may, as a consequence of contact, divide children's loyalties in the early stages of placement, if contact is arranged too soon and for too long when the children are still developing attachments to their new family.

However, 'strong evidence has emerged that children are able to make multiple attachments' (Lindley 1998: 5). This is evident not only from Bowlby's own revision of his theory (Bowlby 1969) (see Attachment and Identity chapter), but also from other studies (Schaffer 1990, Fratter 1996). There is further supporting evidence below and in the next two chapters.

In a review of research Rushton and Mayes (1997) examined ten studies in which the development of fresh attachment in middle childhood has been indirectly assessed. Their summing up of the evidence concludes that 'satisfying relationships do develop between most late placed children and their new parents within the first years of placement, which is testimony to the adaptability of children to new experiences' (p126).

It is the strength of the relationship between adoptive parents and child which determines parental satisfaction, and when a good relationship has developed, quite significant behaviour problems can be tolerated (Hodges and Tizard 1989, cited by Quinton et al. 1998: 23). Hodges and Tizard are supported by the findings of Quinton et al., although the latter had a higher percentage of children with a poor mutual relationship with their parents. Perhaps the older ages and adverse early experiences of their children was partly responsible for this poorer finding.

Attachment and contact

There is little evidence of a causal relationship between contact and attachment in the studies I examined. It is an elusive connection for adopters or children to perceive or for researchers to make, and I address why this might be so.

However, contact generally does not delay or impede or weaken attachment. Fratter (1991) says, 'In terms of attachment, none of the adoptive parents, including those who had had some reservations about maintaining links, thought that their attachment to the child had been delayed or impaired because of the contact' (p46-47). Lindley (1998: 6) cites Thoburn (1994): 'there is no evidence that continued family contact impedes the growth of attachments within the generality of cases...' Neil (2004: 68) confirms that adoptive parents were generally positive about having contact and 'it did not negatively affect their relationship with their child.'

But neither does the lack of contact hinder attachment. Howe (1996) found that children without contact loved and felt loved by their adoptive parents. Later on, when they were between 16 and their mid-twenties, following reunion with birth relatives, all the young people, who as children had been in a group uncomfortable with asking questions, were satisfied with the reunion and with their adoption experience, as were the adoptive parents and birth parents. So in this case of children without contact, their attachment to their adopters had not been hindered, and this remained the case after reunion with their birth mother. This was confirmed

in general terms by Quinton, speaking at a conference mentioned above, when he said that there was no evidence that lack of contact had serious longterm consequences.

Reunion (a meeting between mature adoptees and their birth mother or other birth relative), may improve attachment with the adoptive parents. Another group of children, whom Howe (1996) classified as anxious, angry and preoccupied, had, unlike the above group, been able to ask questions and express anger at their birth mother's rejection. Meeting their birth mother later on had 'laid a ghost to rest' for them. After the reunion, whether contact continued, petered out or ended abruptly, the young people found that the relationship with their adopters improved. Since both the young people who had a good contact experience with their birth mother, and those for whom it was negative, benefited alike by the improvement in their relationship with their adopters, this improvement did not depend on contact that was ongoing or positive, but just on having some contact, and on having an opportunity to say their piece, and perhaps to gain some information, at least by physically seeing and hearing their birth mother. This supports the hypothesis that some kind of later contact can benefit adopted young people.

There is no evidence that openness or contact directly improves attachment. 'Research findings have not so far found that openness leads to greater adjustment or attachment' (Berry 1991: 648). Openness does not necessarily enhance adoptive outcomes, any more than it harms them. Grotevant and McRoy (1998: 102-3) write, 'The lack of significant differences for self-esteem, curiosity, satisfaction and socioemotional adjustment by openness level indicates that the results of this study are not compatible with assertions raised by critics of openness stating that such arrangements will damage children's self-esteem and cause confusion. But neither do these findings support the hypothesis that more openness enhances these outcomes.'

However, Fratter (1991) makes an indirect causal connection between contact and attachment. After her statement (quoted above) that no adoptive parents thought that attachment had been delayed or impaired by contact, she goes on: 'There were some [adoptive parents], indeed, who thought that contact with the birth parents had brought them closer to their child, particularly in the earlier stages of the placement, because it had increased their understanding of the circumstances leading to adoption' (p47). This finding of Fratter's and an indication of it by Ryburn (1992) and Sykes (2000), are the only causal connections I am aware of in the literature that

links the promotion of attachment to contact. The statements by Fratter and Sykes adoptive parents, that contact had increased their understanding of the circumstances leading to adoption, makes me wonder about the connection. It may have been the information supplied by the birth parents which informed the adopters' understanding of their child's background and why their child needed adoption, or it may have been physically seeing the birth parents and their frailties. The question is, was it the contact or was it the information which enhanced the closeness?

It is necessary to be very cautious indeed about making causal connections. Quinton, Selwyn et al. (1998b), in making this point, begin from the changing characteristics of the adopted population. 'There are two important features of current adoptions that should be noted: first, that over 40 per cent of adopted children are aged five or older and, secondly, that a high proportion of these have been adopted because of serious parenting difficulties with their birth parents, including physical and sexual abuse, neglect and rejection ... In the first place the children are likely to have very problematic 'attachment' relationships with their birth parents. It is a matter of faith to argue that contact between them will nevertheless benefit the children in the long run ... We would reiterate that the pressure for contact in these circumstances is in the nature of an experiment that needs to be very carefully monitored. Until we know more about these changes in the adoptive population and their effects, judgments on the advisability of contact will not be well informed or evidence based' (p360-361).

Selwyn (2004: 146) confirms the changing characteristics of the adopted population in a report of a recent study: 'Nearly all the children had experienced at least one form of abuse and 68% had experienced multiple forms of abuse.' And as Kaniuk had written in 1993 (cited in Triseliotis et al. 1997: 77), 'it is important not to underestimate the effects of this [earlier abuse] and carelessly expose children to painful and destructive contact out of a misplaced belief that preserving contact is always beneficial. It is not.'

Triseliotis et al. (1997: 77) underline the need for caution: 'The history of open adoption is too short to provide us with much research evidence, particularly on such complex issues as those of attachment, contact and identity development.' And a generally cautious approach is recommended also by Smith and Logan (2004: 34-35). Just as these researchers enjoin caution, I too, while I have been examining these fascinating and sometimes elusive components of contact and

attachment and identity, have become aware of the necessity for caution, and for not making bold claims about 'causal connections' between contact and attachment.

I conclude this section with a view which has evolved from reading and reviewing the studies of contact. Many of these studies found that the adoptive parents had very positive attitudes to openness and contact. It was notable that they had considered contact, were prepared for it, and in the majority of cases were having contact. Perhaps these positive and open attitudes had contributed to their successful or satisfactory contact and good attachment; perhaps it was not just the contact which influenced attachment, but their generally open and communicative characteristics. As Quinton, Selwyn et al. (1998b: 351) say, 'Most studies did not take the prior psychosocial adjustment of birth parents, new parents or children into account when assessing effects. If this is not done it is not possible to tell whether the apparent effects of contact are primarily a reflection of prior functioning rather than of the benefits of contact itself.' Openness in adoption refers, first and foremost, to a state of mind and heart (Gritter 1997 cited in Brodzinsky 2005: 149). Brodzinsky continues, 'It reflects the general attitudes, beliefs, expectations, emotions, and behavioural inclinations that people have in relation to adoption.'

Identity and contact

It is universally recognised that contact can promote identity formation, and virtually all adopters are able to recognise this very visible connection. This is the message about identity found in all the studies I have reviewed.

Triseliotis (2000) informs us that an adopted person's identity formation is influenced mainly by the quality of family relationships, by community attitudes, and by the completion of the extra tasks of adoption. These tasks for adopted people are largely concerned with gaining in an ongoing way information about their background and the circumstances of their adoption. The tasks, suggested by earlier research, are summarised by Triseliotis (p82).

- Re-attachment to new parents.
- Integrating the knowledge of being adopted, which involves:
 - gradually understanding its meaning and implications;
 - awareness of ancestry and heritage;
 - access to genealogical, ethnic and other information, and contact if desired;
 - acknowledging the difference between psychosocial and biological parenting, and acknowledging one's heritage and difference;

- dealing with the sense of loss and rejection.
- Formation of an identity based on the positive resolution of these tasks and attributes.

These tasks are examined also in the identity section of the findings chapter. Triseliotis continues, 'In spite of all these extra hurdles, most studies point to high levels of satisfaction with the adoptive experience and to the reality of this form of psychosocial parenting' (p95).

Identity formation and its link with the birth family is a visible phenomenon; children and their adopters can see from contact or photographs their physical and social likeness to the birth family, or can read or hear about it from written information. Researchers and adoptive parents alike are unequivocal about the connection between the two. At the same time, we do not know how common identity problems actually are and whether contact will resolve them (Quinton, speaking at the conference mentioned above in 2004).

Demonstrating the thinking of Triseliotis and his colleagues, Fratter (1991: 44) says that agencies that promoted contact did so because it benefited adoptive and birth parents and especially the child, by providing information about origins and about why the child had to leave. It also reassured the adopters and child of the birth family's welfare, and confirmed the birth family's interest – and all this in turn promoted a positive sense of identity.

Neil (2003) asserts that children need information to gain an adequate sense of identity. Children said they liked to see how they resembled their birth families; so they made the connection, but did not refer to it as a matter of identity in the way their adopters were able to do. Some children in Macaskill (2002: 57) were struggling with identity issues. They wanted to understand from whom they had inherited certain physical characteristics or special talents. The children told her that contact helped them see, or hear about, whom they looked like and inherited abilities or skills from, and that issues of grief and loss were also sometimes addressed through contact.

For the vast majority of adopters, the main benefits of contact were unquestionably the information about roots, and keeping the door open for possible future contact, for their children's identity formation. Like virtually all the other studies reviewed, Smith and Logan (2004: 93-95) described their adopters as discussing the importance of information about their children's histories, of keeping it up to date,

using it in conversation with their children, and also feeling better prepared should their children wish to trace other birth relatives when they grew up. This finding is supported by Ryburn (1998), Fratter (1996), Grotevant and McRoy (1998), Howe and Feast (2000), Rushton et al. (2001), Macaskill (2002), Neil (2003), and Triseliotis et al. (2005). Smith and Logan report that the children's responses were generally in agreement with those of their adopters, but the researchers' questions were more concerned with their satisfaction and comfort with contact than with identity.

Sibling relationships may be especially valuable for identity formation. Rowe et al. (1984) found that longterm foster children placed with a sibling were usually glad about this and mentioned the benefit of having someone to talk to about their family of origin (cited in O'Leary and Schofield 1994). Smith and Logan (2004) also noted the importance of supportive reciprocal sibling relationships and the emotional closeness promoted by this and by their shared histories. Other research supports this (Fratter 1996, Lowe et al. 1999, Thomas et al. 1999, Rushton et al. 2001, and Macaskill 2002). Humphrey and Humphrey (1999), cited by Howe and Feast (2000: 16), suggest, 'It is easier to build more comfortable relationships with siblings than birth parents.' This seems to be the case for reasons stated above and possibly because the sense of rejection felt from birth parents is not experienced. Sibling contact is also confirmed by the above researchers as the most usual direct contact, and also often felt by adopters to be more comfortable than contact with birth mothers.

Reunion and identity

Adopted people very often search for their birth mother and other birth relatives, particularly siblings, in adulthood. In answer to the question why adopted people search, Feast and Howe (2000: 16) suggest that there are two explanatory models. In the pathological model the wish to search may stem from a person's feelings of dissatisfaction (or other issues) with their adoption, from mental ill-health, or from having a deep psychological need to search. In this model the need to search is rarely related to a matter-of-fact attitude, as confirmed by Triseliotis (1973), one of the studies that instigated open adoption.

The second, normative model relates searching to identity formation. It considers searching to be a natural outcome of adoption, not a negative response to an adverse situation. This model concentrates on the fluctuations of identity formation and how searching helps adopted people to combine their past and their present, to

make a psychologically healthier, more informed, whole person. This was found to be the case in Triseliotis et al. (2005). So in this model, contact in the form of adult reunion, or the search for it, is important for identity formation.

Race and identity

Race is a vital component of identity. Children who are different from, for instance, white parents in the colour of their skin, their hair type, their religion, language or cultural characteristics of dress, music, food and ways of viewing the world, are easily identified as different and have more tasks to accomplish than their white counterparts. They have to recognise, accept and create an environment of valuing the differences and to challenge racism. These extra hurdles need to be thoroughly addressed over time by their adoptive parents who also need to ensure that the child has access to appropriate role models and mentors. Sutton and Hudson (2005: 22-26). 'Race' and ethnicity are examined further in the Attachment and Identity chapter.

The importance of ethnicity is acknowledged by legislation and guidance. A circular on the Children Act 1989 emphasised the significance of a child's ethnic origin, language, religion and culture (Department of Health 1998). It acknowledges the importance of continuity in minority cultural, religious and linguistic traditions, and reflects a valuing of cultural diversity and a rejection of former assimilationist trends. It looks forward to s1(5) of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which requires due consideration of a child's religion, racial origin, and cultural and linguistic background.

Prevatt Goldstein and Spencer (2000: 5) tell us that much of the recent research listens to the children of colour in placements with white adoptive parents (they mention Thoburn et al. 1998, Ince 1998, Kirton and Woodger 1999, Richards and Ince 2000, Howe and Feast 2000). This avoids the bias of parents' responses about the young people's ethnic identity, adjustment and attachment, and gives a fuller picture of these from more mature adoptees.

Patel et al. (2004: 14) confirm that 'Research would support the idea that parents and children who are visibly and culturally different from one another face extra obstacles in meeting a child's identity needs.' However, they go on to say that research has not established any statistically significant difference in breakdown rates for children of black and minority ethnic origin and children of white origin (citing Rushton and Minnis, 1997, Kirton et al. 2000, Thoburn et al. 2000, Moffat and

Thoburn 2001). Perhaps, for the clearly extra hurdles of ethnic identity formation for children of colour placed with white adopters, the adopters have also provided some compensatory factors (Triseliotis 2000: 92). They may have provided appropriate role models in valuing and promoting difference, and may have prepared the child to deal with racism and safeguard herself from it.

However, Triseliotis et al. in their recent study (2005: 140) found that ‘...the majority [of black or mixed-heritage adoptees] thought that their difference did affect them and that ethnic identity and culture became an issue for them ... It is not that they felt altogether unhappy about their adoption but they came to feel different from others and ask questions of themselves about who they were.’ Some adoptive parents of these young people told the researchers that they had underestimated the complexity of transracial adoption. It does seem that ethnically matched families should be sought, but if they are not found, then white adopters should be thoroughly prepared for the extra needs of identity formation in their children. The adopters may perhaps share something of importance with their child’s background, such as the same religion as Baptists or Methodists.

Identity and contact: conclusion

The connection between contact and identity, as we have seen, is much more certain than the connection with attachment. However, here too there is the question, how much is it the interest taken by the adoptive parents, and their good communication to their children of information gained from contact, which promotes the children’s identity, and how much is it the contact per se.

Chapter 3

Literature review

Introduction

To carry out my study I need a thorough working knowledge of past and present studies of adoption generally, and of adoption with contact. I need to see what has been learned from the findings of other researchers, the methodologies of previous studies, what I can use or should avoid, the contributions of earlier studies to our knowledge, and gaps in our knowledge.

I begin with the classic and seminal 1977 study by Barbara Tizard of 30 children who were adopted and 23 who returned to their birth families. Tizard thought that her study was a 'small snapshot'. But it was large in its originality in looking at older-placed children, which was unusual at that time, a time of looking for perfect babies for perfect couples. We learn from Tizard's examples how we have currently moved on or still not moved on. Tizard's insightful examination of early attachment issues for these institutionalised children and their affect on the children's later careseeking behaviour with their adoptive parents and their birth mothers (for those who returned home) is most useful to me in further comprehending and confirming attachment patterns and helping me with my attachment questions.

Joan Fratter's 1991 study of adoption with contact followed her study of four years earlier by reinterviewing the children and families. Since contact was rare at that time and she interviewed the children this is an important study for me to learn from. Contact had mostly increased, and was being negotiated by more than half of the young adopted people; generally contact was important to them, especially with siblings. This may be a theme for me to follow as it was only through contact with birth parents that they established important relationships with siblings. So I can explore whether these findings still stand and try to find answers to my study questions about self-esteem and identity through contact with birth parents and with siblings.

Quinton et al. (1998) examined the behaviour problems of children at home and at school and tried to discover if these were related to the children's earlier experiences; they also looked at how relationships developed in the family between adoptive parents, children and siblings. All of this is relevant to my questions about sense of belonging, identity and self-esteem, as it is also relevant to attachment. Quinton et al. used a 48-item questionnaire with the adoptive parents which assesses the development of open, secure and affective behaviour by the children towards the new parents. This questionnaire, I understood was available for me to use. The researchers' patience and industriousness gave them excellent results, and I shall try to emulate this in my research. They were keen to identify protective factors, instead of just risks; my study may do this, as well as looking at other gaps they have identified. This study's emphasis on relationships is most useful and encouraging for me; I can explore further the themes they have identified to facilitate me in answering my questions on attachment and contact.

The aim of Thomas et al.'s 1999 study was to listen to and examine children's views on and experiences of adoption, so as to gain an understanding of their support needs. This study is valuable to me as children are interviewed; the authors give much useful advice on doing this, and tools for doing it, with the children's interests and comfort put foremost. Relationships between the children and parents are explored, and this can be emulated and explored by my study through the framework of attachment theory. Although the children were generally positive about contact this was not the case for all children all of the time. However, contact with and the continued interest of the birth parents was important for identity, sustaining existing relationships and helping self-esteem, so answering one of my questions. Thomas et al. raised questions I could attempt to address about preparation, support and resilience, which are important issues in contact and its promotion of attachment and identity. So this study informs, gives practical help to and raises questions for my own. It shows that children do need and want to talk about their experiences, and this is encouraging for my research.

Catherine Macaskill's 2002 study set out to make, and achieved, an analysis of the factors that make contact work well and those that prevent it from doing so. I selected it for these reasons and also because she is insightful about attachment relationships and their complexities in the area of contact. Macaskill's study is helpful to me for its practical advice on the use of her tools and on the sensitive preparation of the adoptive parents and children for interviews. She kept her

parents and children constantly informed. She answers some of my research questions about belonging and identity.

The purpose of Beth Neil's 2002 study was to explore how post-adoption face-to-face birth family contact can work for adopted children in the preschool age range. I have chosen her study as it somewhat reflects mine in its examination of contact and the relationships between the various individuals involved in it. She looks at the children's self-esteem, which is one of my questions, and found, unlike some studies such as Macaskill's, that it was not so much the detail of management of contact but adoptive parents' belief in adoption (and presumably in contact) that was salient in satisfaction with the placement. I would like to explore this when I consider where their belief stems from, and when I consider my question whether contact promotes a sense of belonging, self-esteem and identity, and whether it promotes good relationships.

Beth Neil's 2004 study examined indirect contact, the most usual form of contact in all the major British studies and in mine. So it is pertinent to learn from its focus on the effectiveness of this form of contact, and to consider particularly the exchange of information and how it does or does not enable communication. All this is salient to my questions on identity and attachment formation and their connection with contact.

Carole Smith and Janette Logan's research (2004) on direct contact is another study I would wish to emulate for its thoroughness of methodology, and its comprehensive and considered examination of the subject. Their focus, similar to mine, included the comfort and satisfaction with contact experienced by the children and their adoptive and birth relatives, and also the emotional impact of contact on its participants as well as beneficial and detrimental factors influencing contact.

David Brodzinsky's 2005 *Reconceptualization of Openness in Adoption* puts forward new concepts on contact, communication and openness. He informs and encourages wider and deeper consideration of the complex issues involved. His theory is about communicative openness and what contributes to it in adoptive family life and relationships and what is primary for adopted children's healthy psychological adjustment. Clearly his theory is crucial to my study. I attended a conference at which he was present in January 2005, having already analysed my data and identified an important theme: that the essence of the promotion of attachment and identity in the children in my two groups, one with and one without

contact, was good communication between adopters and their children, not contact per se. So his theory supports one of my most salient findings.

While the major research on adoption and contact is reviewed here general conclusions from the research have been set out in chapter 2, in the context of the changes in adoption, from the 'clean break' era to the openness and contact which are the current norm. The works of Grotevant and McRoy (1998), Howe (1996), Sawbridge (1991), Rushton et al. (2001), Feast and Howe (2000), Triseliotis (2000), Ryburn (1992), Brodzinsky (2005), and relevant articles from *Adoption & Fostering* between 1984 and 2005, were used in that overview. Triseliotis (2000) and Ryburn (1992) will also be included in chapter 4, Attachment and Identity.

Tizard, B. A. (1977) A second chance. London: Open Books.

The purpose of Tizard's study was to look at what life was like for children brought up from infancy in institutions. She examined how they fared later with the transition and adjustment to new environments. One group of 23 children was restored to their birth mother and the other was placed with 30 adoptive parents. Altogether the study was concerned with five groups: earlier adopted and earlier restored children, who left the institution between the ages of two and four, and later adopted and later restored and later fostered children, who left the institution between the ages of four-and-a-half and seven-and-a-half.

The adopted children received a great deal more play and learning time with their adopters than did the restored children. This is an excellent example of responsive, encouraging, gentle, interested, persevering parenting, which Bowlby would have recommended to build the child's attachment and self-esteem. Furthermore, Tizard says that ordinary middleclass parents also spent less time in joint activities with their children. These childless couples with perhaps little parenting experience, in the main enjoyed being with their children and found them becoming attached and affectionate within six to 12 months of placement.

Adoptive parents of six children did experience difficulties, telling the interviewers about tantrums and destructive, aggressive and immature behaviour. The behaviour of two children improved fairly rapidly, but the other four continued to present difficult behaviour. Nursery reports on these four children indicated demanding or aggressive behaviour and resultant management problems. Tizard found that these reports were good predictors of whether children's behaviour

would be positive or negative in their new homes. It may be that in these cases the children had experienced more early rejection and insecure parenting, exacerbated by adopters who were not able to give the children the responses they needed.

Tizard had wanted to find out the satisfaction levels of the adopters by asking specific questions, instead of using the somewhat vague tick-boxes of studies which asked whether they felt extremely satisfied, moderately satisfied, or dissatisfied, and so on, with adoption. However, Tizard found she too had failed to account for parental satisfaction with adoption. She explained that it may have been because some of the adopters hedged their answers; because the numbers were too small; or because she did not have a valid measure of satisfaction. She went on to find that a common feature in the three mothers who had felt least positive about their adoptive children was that the children were not attached to them. She felt that the interaction between the parents' and children's personalities may have been responsible, as these children had been attached to nurses in the institution and were said to be affectionate and easy to manage.

Tizard tells us (p230) that her findings indicate Bowlby was correct to suggest that a child's early relationships may have an important effect on later social development. Half the 20 adopted children had relationship problems with other adults and children, though not with their parents. She found that most of the children in her study seemed to develop a close, mutually affectionate relationship with their adopters within six to 12 months of placement. So, whether or not children developed attachments to adopters seemed to depend not so much on earlier attachments in the institution, but largely on the willingness of the adoptive parents to accept a dependent relationship and to put much time into developing it.

Discussion of Tizard's findings

Adopters perceived their children's attention-seeking behaviour as endearing. Perhaps this can be partly accounted for by the long time many had waited to have a child. In addition, the preparation for adoption by the family social worker helped them anticipate and plan their life with the children; birth parents do not have this opportunity and process to go through before having children. Moreover, some of the birth mothers of the restored children were single parents or were with a new partner who was not the child's father. Other birth mothers possibly continued to struggle with finances, housing, and guilt over their child having been in care, and could still not be the kind of mothers they wanted to be to their restored child, perhaps because of their own insecure attachment experiences. It may be crucial for

the well-being of some children and their birth mothers that Tizard's suggestion be heeded, that for some children, returning home may not be in their best interests.

Just as Tizard bravely asked direct and difficult questions, to try to establish the level of the adopters' satisfaction, she was also courageous in telling us that she had failed to do so. Quinton et al. (1998) also found that identifying positive qualities and levels of satisfaction was difficult; research seemed better able to identify negatives, or concentrated more on negatives.

Tizard speculated that the interaction between children and adoptive parents whose personalities do not complement each other, may have been one reason why previously affectionate and attached children failed to form attachments. This is similar to, but more than 20 years earlier than, the findings of Quinton et al. (1998). It seems crucial to identify complementary personalities between children and adoptive parents during the adoption process, to try to ensure good outcomes for children and their parents.

Tizard's findings give me questions to consider in my own research, particularly when assessing the attachment of children and exploring how much contact or its lack affects attachments, and how much is due to the responsiveness or otherwise of the adopters.

The profound implications for practice that Tizard highlighted remain vital today.

- Older children can be placed successfully.
- Children with poor early relationships can form close, mutually affectionate relationships with their adoptive parents, though they may still have relationship problems with other adults and children.
- Adoptive parents and their adoptive children need to have complementary personalities.
- Restoring children to their birth families may not be in the best interests of some children.

Most of these conclusions, particularly the last two, require further research and further refining, if we are to make the very best placements for children. Tizard contributes helpful findings on attachment and family relationships for me to reflect on.

Fratter, J. (1991) Adoptive parents and open adoption in the UK. In: Open adoption: the philosophy and the practice, edited by A. Mullender. London: BAAF.

This innovative study of open adoption was unusual and important because the 22 families had adopted 32 children who had maintained some form of contact with their birth parents since their placement, something quite rare in Britain in 1987. The children had special needs, including physical or learning disabilities, multiple placements, or difficult or abusive backgrounds; their ages ranged from two-and-a-half to 20 at the time of the interviews.

Fratter found, as have Howell and Ryburn (1987), Macaskill (2002), Neil (2002) and Smith and Logan (2004), that the agency and social worker responsible for preparing the adoptive parents had a powerful role in shaping attitudes for or against openness and contact. Agencies that promoted contact believed that it benefited adoptive and birth parents, and particularly the children, because it could provide information about the children's past, to help them understand about their birth family and why they had to leave it; the contact, information and interest of their birth parents help them build a positive identity; they are reassured of how their birth family is getting on.

Conversely, agencies that did not promote contact had little experience of it, and believed that adoptive and birth parents needed protection from extra pressures and from too much responsibility at an emotional time, before the placement. When Fratter compared 10 agencies who maintained contact with 12 who did not, she discovered that attitudes and practice were very different. There were also wide variations in how well and how fully the contact needs of the children had been explored, that is, the alternatives to closed adoption. Many of these factors are still issues in more recent studies.

Another finding of Fratter's was that the degree of openness of both direct and indirect contact varied widely between the families, from adoptive parents who welcomed birth parents as regular visitors in their homes, to just a one-off meeting between adoptive and birth parents, which was sometimes followed by a link or the possibility of one in future. But most families had a level of contact somewhere in between these extremes.

Adoptive parents went on to tell Fratter that they felt that contact had removed the opposition of birth parents who had previously not agreed with the adoption plan. So with communication and greater knowledge of each other, both sets of parents dispelled the fears and threats they felt and the myths they had previously believed. These fears included being judged by and not being liked by the other parents. Adoptive parents could sometimes imagine abusive parents as monsters, but on meeting them could see them as sad and often ineffective parents who had themselves experienced poor parenting.

Fratter established that 16 families who had agreed to contact, with 24 children between them, felt either very positive or positive about contact, because they could see the benefits for themselves and their children. Eight had face-to-face contact with birth relatives and the other eight communicated directly. All these families considered adoption of a child as a gift and not a rescue, and they were able to acknowledge the birth parents' loss of the children (p45). Eleven of the 14 childless families did not consider that their infertility was an issue, and contact with the birth family had not kept the wound of infertility open or interfered with their attachment to the child. It may be that they had come to terms as much as people can with their infertility, and were able to empathise, through their infertility and the loss of the children they had hoped for, with their child and the birth parents in their loss of each other.

None of these positive families thought that attachment had been weakened or delayed by contact. Some adoptive parents thought that contact had indeed brought them closer to their child, particularly in the early stages of placement, because it had increased their understanding of the circumstances that had led to their adoption. This answers positively one of my research questions: does contact promote attachment with adoptive parents? Fratter would suggest that it does. I will return to this later.

Six of the 14 childless families recognised some initial rivalry, usually with the birth parent of the same gender. Sharing was hard, they told the researcher, but subsequent meetings dissipated these difficult feelings for all but one adoptive mother, who felt her resentment over contact had increased.

All but one of the adoptive families felt that contact benefited their children, despite some problems. The characteristics associated with positive placements, which

would also be those that benefited the child (Triseliotis et al. 1997, Quinton et al. 1998), included these:

- The child saw a good relationship between birth and adoptive parents.
- The child felt free to attach to adopters (having been given 'permission' by birth parents to do so).
- Adoptive parents believed that their child's sense of identity benefited from contact and from an understanding of why she or he was adopted.
- Flexible contact was negotiated between both the birth and adoptive parents, at one home or the other, without social work involvement.

Discussion of Fratter's findings

Fratter's research was rare in that it examines a group of children having contact with their birth parents at a time when many adopters were not prepared by their agencies for any kind of contact, and most adoptions were in the nature of the clean-break variety. There was some bias, as the families may have been selected by their agencies or been volunteers.

Fratter found that adoptive parents were not only able to accept contact but seemed to value it because they could see their children benefited from it. This was evident from the way the children related to them, seeming to feel free to do so, with their birth parents' permission. Adopters also felt that contact helped their child understand the past and build a positive sense of self with the help of information and the continued interest of the birth parents (p53). It would seem that the positive attitudes and preparation by their agencies supported the adopters in understanding and then experiencing how contact benefited their children and themselves.

Fratter's study highlights the weakness of one of the old and still ongoing arguments put forward by Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1973), that a child's attachment to his or her psychological parents, the adoptive parents, will be weakened by contact with the birth parents and that therefore adoption should mean a clean break. Fratter's research suggested that this was not the case, as all adopters except one felt that contact benefited their child and most adopters said it had not delayed or diluted their attachment.

This finding answers positively my research question: does contact promote attachment with adoptive parents? Generally families thought that indeed it did. The adopters also told Fratter that they felt their children's sense of identity was improved and enriched by the information, explanations and interest of the birth

parents, which contact allowed. This answers positively my research question: does contact promote a child's sense of identity?

A limitation of this study, which Fratter addresses, was its small numbers, which do not allow for statistical analysis. It could also be claimed that they were very open in attitude and therefore a biased sample, as the less open folk had not come forward. Only six children and no birth parents were interviewed, so as Fratter says, '... the picture conveyed by the adoptive parents was essentially a snapshot ...' (p58). Unlike the studies of Thomas et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002) and Smith and Logan (2004), in which the majority of children were interviewed, Fratter was unable to seek their views and compare them with those of the adopters.

Fratter was keen for further research to look at the longterm impact of contact on children. She did of course go on to do some. However, this remains a need because contact is relatively new, we are still learning, and we need to know more, especially from the point of view of the children and young people.

Quinton, D., Rushton, A., Dance, C. and Mayes, D. (1998) *Joining new families: a study of adoption and fostering in middle childhood*. Chichester: Wiley.

This classic study examined the placements of 61 children aged from five to nine, in their first year of placement. The study used a prospective, repeated-measure design in which the children's problems and the parents' responses to them were assessed shortly after the placement, again after six months, and lastly at the end of the first year. The sample was drawn mostly from social services departments in and around London. Twelve children were in longterm foster placements, though four of these became adoptions, and the remaining 49 children were placed for adoption. Twentyone children had some contact with at least one birth parent, but in only 16 cases was this face-to-face: nine with the birth mother, four with the birth father and three with both. Fifteen out of a possible 40 children who had siblings had some form of contact, including face-to-face and letterbox arrangements.

The researchers defined the children's backgrounds and also the preparation for placement received by the children and their new families. They explored the relationship of these two factors to the placement experience, examined the behaviour problems the children exhibited at home and at school, and attempted to discover if any of these factors were related to the children's earlier experiences.

Lastly they looked at how relationships developed in the new family, between parents and children and also between siblings. Again they examined whether these were affected by earlier experiences.

As well as gaining information from the interviews the authors also got valuable data from a 48-item questionnaire completed by the parents, which assessed the development of open, secure and affectionate behaviour by the child towards the new parents. They avoided calling this an attachment measure as it was felt this would be unacceptable to the academic community. Notably they were unable to locate a suitable measure so constructed their own. I too found this to be the case.

Neither the research team nor the social services departments felt that it was appropriate to question the children directly about their new families in their first year of placement (p1). However, they did collect some measures of the childrens' cognitive and behavioural functioning in the majority of cases, in the early evening in the childrens' new homes (p32).

An important finding of Hodges and Tizard (1989b, cited by Quinton et al.) was that primarily the strength of the relationship between parent and child determined the level of parent satisfaction. So when a good relationship had been developed, quite significant behaviour difficulties could be tolerated. Quinton et al. say this is very important as '... it is now known that the propensity for the development of meaningful and mutual relationships is crucial to parental satisfaction with the stability of the placement. There has been a growing awareness of the complexity of the interplay between previous experiences of parents and children and the way in which these may affect the expectations that each party has of the permanent placement' (p23). Quinton et al. found that their data lent support to the findings of Hodges and Tizard, but they had a higher percentage of children (27%) with a poor mutual relationship with parents than the 16% found by Hodges and Tizard. So there is growing awareness of the complexity of connections between the past experiences of parents and children, and the way in which these in turn may affect what each of them hopes for from the placement.

The only significant difference to emerge between children placed in foster care and those placed for adoption was birth parent contact. Contact took place for only a minority of children placed for adoption, and this was also true for sibling contact. But seven of the eight fostered children had seen their birth mother and siblings during their first year in placement, and most of these had also seen their birth

father. So it was concluded that the primary reason for choosing foster care appeared to be that face-to-face contact with birth parents was to continue. Other studies including those of Macaskill (2002) and Neil (2002) also found this to be the case.

An interesting and important finding was that levels of behaviour problems seemed not to be connected to contact; however, a higher proportion of the children who had face-to-face contact were in the 'less stable' group at the end of the first year. This association was complicated by differential rates of contact between children in foster care and those in prospective adoptive placements. Once the type of placement was taken into account there was no association between birth parent contact and placement stability.

'Adoptive parents reported that children could be unsettled by contact visits and information from birth parents in 70% of birth father and 45% of birth mother contacts. This unsettling could be before or after a visit, manifesting itself as anxiety or over-excitement. In most cases it diminished fairly rapidly' (p69). This short-lived upset seemed well managed by adopters.

It was found that in the contact with siblings the planning was mostly unclear and even when clear was not followed through. The authors said: 'This is surprising since none of the new parents said they were uncomfortable with the idea of sibling contact' (p67).

Generally, adoptive parents thought that contact was helpful or neutral in effect. However, their views changed according to the nature of the latest contact. Some adoptive parents viewed contact as unhelpful when they saw the children's birth parents giving the children mixed or inappropriate messages or making promises that could not be fulfilled. Even when adoptive parents were happy with the progress of contact they had some concerns about how it would work out in the longterm. Contact with siblings could also have an unsettling effect on the children, and 40% of adopters were surprised at the lack of positive interaction between siblings during the meetings.

The study's general conclusion on placement outcomes is that they were negatively affected by factors that included: the placement of single children into established families; rejection by birth families; and problems in responsiveness.

Discussion of the findings of Quinton et al.

The researchers considered the strength and tenacity of the relationship between the children and parents and how it affects parental satisfaction and holding on through difficulties. These were clearly critical factors in the child's sense of belonging and the adoptive parents' reciprocal sense that the child belonged with them.

The authors found that it seemed to be a belief of child care social workers, that if children are to have ongoing face-to-face contact with birth parents then long term fostering is the prime choice of placement. This is borne out by other studies including, Hess and Proch (1993), Fratter (1996), and Neil (2002), and by my own and my colleagues' practice experience. For the nineties this is somewhat surprising, but it is a belief that is clearly still upheld, perhaps supported by the facts that foster carers are already managing contact, that they are known by the children and birth parents, and that they are often seen as less daunting to birth parents. Social workers often think that adopters who can manage contact, particularly face-to-face contact, are difficult to find. As we saw from Fratter's 1991 study, this was not the case, and nowadays with better preparation and understanding of their child's possible need for contact, adopters can often be found who can manage and value contact.

The researchers made the unexpected finding about contact between siblings being unclear and not followed through, even though adopters told the researchers they were quite comfortable about this kind of contact. The reasons put forward were difficulties in finding time and in making arrangements between carers. This may well be a partial explanation, but I do feel that the authors are being very generous, as children are missing out on possibly very important contact with siblings for lack of some forethought. Some families may need support in this, especially in the first year and as changes occur and new issues arise. The studies by Fratter (1991), Beckett et al. (1998) and Smith and Logan (2004) support this view.

The authors emphasise that adopters generally have positive attitudes to contact, whilst at the same time they are concerned about the longterm outcomes for the children. This mirrors the concerns of practitioners and researchers alike, as contact is relatively new and we do not know how grownup adopted children will feel about contact plans and arrangements that were put into place for them by adults. This has been highlighted by research reviewed, particularly, Thomas et al. (1999); Macaskill (2002) and Smith and Logan (2004), Researchers also concerned that

adopted children and young people feel that their needs and wishes have not always been explored and listened to.

I found it frustrating, as no doubt the researchers did, that the small numbers involved made it impossible to elicit whether it was contact or the placement type that had more influence on the stability of the placement. Perhaps the authors' follow-up study may shed more light on this.

This research only partly answers one of my research questions, as it focuses mainly on the impact of various factors on outcome (for instance, pre-placement experiences; differing parenting styles of the new parents; their views on the social work support and its association with outcome at one year). However, it does examine many contact issues, and it discusses the importance of a good attachment relationship being formed between the adoptive parents and the child. Moreover, the researchers found that where a good relationship had developed between the child and parents, even high levels of difficult behaviour could be tolerated. This finding indicates that good attachments have been made; it seems that many of the children feel a sense of belonging in their families, and that this is reciprocated by the adoptive parents. However, the authors recommend further research into the processes linking the factors that are risks and benefits to placement stability, and into why these are benefits or risks. Identity and attachment factors are not addressed, as these are not the focus of the study, and this leaves a gap into which my research can try to put some useful findings.

Thomas, C., Beckford, V., Lowe, N. and Murch, M. (1999) Adopted children speaking. London: BAAF.

This exemplary study of 41 adopted children has contributed immensely to our knowledge of children's views and experiences of adoption and to our understanding of their support needs, and these, the authors tell us on p2, were their overall aims. The sample was drawn from the earlier study of Lowe et al. (1999), which had interviewed 48 adoptive parents.

Some children's perceptions of contact were overwhelmingly positive; in fact five of the 12 who had direct contact with their birth mother wanted more frequent contact with her. Six of the others were happy and content with their contact; they felt it helped them remember their birth parents and siblings and it made them feel happy, so they did not want any changes made to it. However, one twelve-year-old girl

wanted contact reduced as she found some aspects of it hard to manage, in particular, balancing the extra time she now needed for studying with visiting her birth mother and talking to her on the phone (p95). So although contact generally was seen as positive, this was not the case for all the children all the time.

Of the 26 children who had no contact with their birth parents, 12 apparently accepted this, that is, they did not express any wishes for change. Seven children explicitly said they did not want any contact. Another seven said they wanted some contact with one or both birth parents. One girl thought that she might want to meet her birth mother when she was 18 or 19. Children who had been abused generally did not want any contact. These interesting findings will be explored in the discussion.

Contact with at least one sibling occurred, and varied in frequency and context, for 17 of the 41 children. Two had letterbox contact with their siblings, and the other 15 had face-to-face contact. Another 10 children had siblings with whom they had no form of contact. As in the case of children in contact with birth parents, some of the children who had face-to-face contact wanted to see their siblings more often. Two children who had no contact wanted some, and six others seemed content without it, or at any rate did not wish to change anything about their lack of it. One girl, Lucy, made it explicit that she was relieved not to have contact, '... 'cause I think they would still be horrible to me' (p104). Paul (12) was quite sanguine and able to see some of the benefits and drawbacks of limited contact with his brother, saying, 'I like him, 'cause I mean, if you see your sister or brother too much then you end up arguing sometimes, don't you? If you only see them a few times, like twice a month or something, then you get on with them' (p102).

Five children had contact with members of their extended birth family. As happened with the other kinds of contact, geography and the work commitments of the adoptive family sometimes limited this to being less frequent than some children would have wished.

Discussion of the findings

Children had told the researchers about their early difficulties building relationships in the new families. They initially recognised that the problem was one they shared with their adopters, and that it was not just onesided. They went on to learn to live with each other, and seemed able to work at building reciprocal relationships. Since the interviews were carried out after the adoption orders were made, and the

average time for this to happen was two years and four months, the children had been in the families for quite some time; however, they were older-placed children who also had a previous adverse history from which to recover, and it did seem that this was happening. This seems to indicate that the children are making attachments to their adoptive parents and have a sense of belonging with them. Since contact was a feature for most of these children, with 24 having direct or indirect contact with members their birth families, and 15 with previous foster carers, this finding may indicate a positive answer to my question about contact promoting attachment and belonging.

A most important finding was that eight children perceived contact as overwhelmingly positive. They said it made them happy, and felt that it helped them remember their birth parents and siblings. It kept memories and current information about their original family alive, and they were happy that their original family was still interested in them. Also both their families would more than likely also be communicating and so showing approval of one another.

However, Wanda (12) wanted to reduce her contact with her birth mother because she found some aspects of it difficult to manage, and also because she needed more time now for studying. It seems that the factors of time and her birth mother's emotional needs were influencing Wanda, as well as her own emerging needs in relation to adoption, identity and adolescence. This is a time when all children face identity issues, but adopted children have the additional issues of another family history to cope with as well as its loss.

A boy whose mother got upset and cried down the phone wanted contact to continue. He found his birth mother's heavy emotional needs difficult to manage, but on balance he wanted the same level of contact. Questions arising from these two cases include: is this boy better prepared, better supported, and more resilient than the girl, or is contact more or less frequent than hers? Answers to these questions might have helped to establish what factors had helped this boy and whether these were missing in the girl's case. Issues of gender and lifestages may be involved.

The findings about the 26 children who had no contact with birth parents, show that nearly half these children seemed to accept their lack of contact. Were these children mainly boys, whom we know from Howe and Feast (2000) tend to be less curious than girls, or were the children afraid of further rejections, as seven were

explicitly saying they did not want any contact? It would have been helpful to know these variables; and the same goes for the seven children who did want contact with either or both birth parents.

The authors point out how much children struggle to understand why it is not possible for them to have some kind of contact or more frequent contact with their birth families, and how much they need clear, honest explanations of why this is so. This study makes us immensely aware of the strong feelings children have about contact, and aware that these feelings, along with their needs and wishes, change over time and should be regularly talked about, reviewed and addressed.

Thomas et al. feel that, when adopted children have been abused and neglected, contact is all the more important, so that the children can hear or read the birth mother's concern and apologies, while the birth mother herself is helped with her guilt and with her worry that her child is alright. Contact in these circumstances may be appropriate if the birth mother is able to address the neglect or abuse of the child, perhaps even at a one-off meeting or through a letter.

Throughout this study the authors illustrate the importance of interviewing children and young people. How else can we truly find out their feelings, needs and wishes, so as to establish the best and most appropriate contact for them in a flexible way and one that meets their changing needs? Fratter too interviewed the children in her 1996 research, something she felt was necessary as she had managed to interview only the adopters in 1991.

This study differs from most others in the field and in this literature review, because it concentrates totally on the children's views. It covers how they found out about the plan for their adoption; who told them and how they were told; what they felt about it; and events and feelings they had about what happened before, during and after they were adopted; and contact, interestingly the biggest chapter. The authors make no apologies for not interviewing and listening to the views of adoptive or birth parents, as it is the often neglected voice of the child in which they are interested.

The vital implication for practice from this study is that practitioners must learn to listen to children, giving them time and attention, at a place and time helpful to the children. The practitioners need to talk with them in ways that enable children to feel they will be listened to. The children must feel comfortable, and able to tell their social workers their hopes, fears, needs, and wishes, and any little things of concern

to them; they must not feel that the social worker is too busy or the matter too trivial for the worker to bother with.

It is difficult to be critical of this excellent study. However, I would like to have known more about the individual children's backgrounds, and about the circumstances in which they were quoted. For reasons of confidentiality and time and space it is understandable that this information had to be limited.

It seems appropriate to conclude with just two of many important quotes from the children (p140): 'They [the social workers] should try to let their children speak a bit more, so they're not keeping everything stuck inside them.' 'Explain to the children what's going on. Like, give them information about their parents, birth parents, foster parents ... And, oh, really help them understand what's going on. Encourage the parents to talk about it a bit more. Let the children talk to friends about it.'

Macaskill, C. (2002) Safe contact?: children in permanent placement and contact with their birth relatives. Lyme Regis: Russell House.

Macaskill's general aim is to make a detailed analysis of factors that make contact work or prevent it working well. She examined contact between 106 children in 79 longterm foster care and adoption placements, and their birth relatives.

More specifically her aim was to study the everyday impact on adopted and foster children of professionals putting into practice the contact plans and the planning and preparation for contact; any difficulties encountered, and how these were tackled; and the quality and quantity of existing support services, and gaps in them.

Among Macaskill's identified factors that help contact work well were these: a clear contact plan at the beginning of the placement; an effective support structure; adoptive parents and foster carers with personal experience of trauma from their own childhood through the loss of significant family relationships, who were especially committed to and persevering in maintaining contact. Of the 23 children who had contact supervised by a social worker, nine found it unhelpful, three were indifferent and eleven were enthusiastic about social work presence; some children said 'it made me feel safe' (p110).

Factors which were found by Macaskill to be unhelpful or to cause contact to disintegrate included: a birth relative upsetting the child, and affecting the child's

ability to settle; a birth relative rejecting the child; a breakdown in the relationship between birth relatives and the adoptive family; a child deciding that contact was too stressful and requesting termination; birth relatives' whereabouts becoming unknown (p117).

Macaskill found that the overall impact on children of contact with adult birth relatives was that 57 percent of the children experienced contact as both positive and negative. Twentyfive percent felt it had had a very negative impact. Twelve percent felt it to be a very positive experience and six percent were indifferent to the impact of contact. So it seems that the majority of children had some worries about contact, at least some of the time.

Most contact was between siblings in different placements, and Macaskill found that when some of the siblings who had never lived together had contact they were overtly indifferent towards each other. This may support the view of practitioners and researchers such as Triseliotis et al. (1997), Howe (1996) and Fratter (1996), who have highlighted the concern over whether we should or even could try to build a meaningful relationship where none exists.

To highlight the fact that our knowledge about contact is still at an embryonic stage Macaskill cites Quinton et al. (1997: 411): 'In our present state of knowledge it is seriously misleading to think that what we know about contact is at a level of sophistication to allow us to make confident assertions about the benefits to be gained from it regardless of family circumstances and relationships. At least in the case of permanent placements the social experiment that is currently underway needs to be recognised as an experiment, not as an example of evidence-based practice.'

A vital, seemingly contradictory finding to come out of this research was that in examining the children's attitudes to contact with birth relatives Macaskill found them to be diverse; some had immense emotional investment in the contact while others had no real affection for their birth parents. But at the same time the children needed to know the birth relatives were safe and well, and also needed other background information from their birth parents. In conclusion Macaskill says, 'Despite the difficulties inherent in contact relationships, the majority of children were very eager for contact to happen. Contact with birth relatives is therefore likely to continue to be an important aspect of adoption and fostering practice throughout the 21st century' (p145).

So one of the messages this study gives is that although contact is not appropriate for all children all the time it may be appropriate and helpful in some form at some time in their lives. We need to be flexible, review the situation, and keep communication open, even if through a third party at times.

Macaskill's study tacitly answers some of my research questions. For example, a sense of belonging in their adoptive family was implicit in the interviews with the children and young people, especially in chapter seven, *The Children's Perspective*. Rita (14) says: 'I'm lucky I know my birth mum loves me. I know that this family love me. They chose me. They must love Shane and me to go through all that they've been through' (p108).

Macaskill answers another of my research questions concerning identity. She found that during contact the children were able to see for themselves whom they resembled and to see or hear whose talents they had inherited. So they were able to explore identity issues through face-to-face contact with their birth relatives, which can be plainer and more reassuring than information which comes second- or third-hand through a letterbox system. In turn this may support their adopters' explanations.

Macaskill's methodology was also most informative for my study; in particular her tools to help the children talk with her were sensitive and child-centred. These included an illustrated picture book about a dog named Ben who was adopted, and his feelings, wishes, unfulfilled hopes, questions and answers about his adoption, contact and other simpler factors.

Macaskill's detailed, accessible study addressed and was insightful concerning the need for knowledge and understanding about contact issues of practitioners and those in the adoption circle. Her implications for the good practice of contact included: Full consultation; flexibility; good communication both written and verbal between all parties to the contact; preparation of the child; a risk assessment of links between the the birth relatives with contact and the other wider abusive network; introductory meetings between involved adults and ongoing financial as well as practical and emotional support.

Neil, E. (2002) Managing face-to-face contact for young adopted children. In: Argent, H. Staying connected: managing contact arrangements in adoption. London: BAAF.

The purpose of Neil's study was to explore how post-adoption face-to-face birth family contact can work for adopted children of pre-school age, and to look at what needs to be done to make such contact comfortable and useful to all involved.

The sample was drawn from 12 adoption agencies. A questionnaire completed by social workers from these agencies gave a database of information on 168 children. Overall, 17% of these children were having face-to-face contact with adult birth relatives and 81% had letterbox contact. From this sample, with some additional children, 36 became the focus of this study.

Neil found that 'The most important factor related to the satisfaction of adopters with contact arrangements was not the detail of how the contact was set up, but the belief of adopters in such contact' (p21). Fratter (1996) supports this as she also found that belief in adoption (and presumably contact) was important to adopters' satisfaction with the placement.

Another salient finding of Neil's was that adopters felt that contact had not stopped them from having close relationships with their children. Instead, contact often seemed to help them feel more secure in their parenting by reducing fears and negative images of the birth parents, which they had held before meeting them. It also emerged through contact that the birth parents had come to consider the adopters as the psychological parents. Although this did not diminish their loss it somehow helped them come to terms with it, whilst at the same time giving the adopters more confidence in their role as the 'real' parents.

Neil established that agency attitudes and practice in the matter of contact varied greatly and were most powerful in shaping those of adopters. This has also been found by Triseliotis et al. (1997), Fratter (1996), Macaskill (2002) and Smith and Logan (2004).

It seems most significant that all the adopters interviewed identified some benefits of contact, though some adopters were more enthusiastic than others. In addition, many adopters' satisfaction with contact seemed to be more related to their attitudes towards the value of family contact than to how the visits actually went. So they

could overlook unsatisfactory visits for the sake of the satisfying outcome of making links with part of their child's other family.

Neil makes the important point that practice concerning the age of children who should have and might benefit from contact, is back to front. That is, direct contact is most frequently set up for older children (Lowe et al. 1999). It is planned infrequently for younger children, who may actually manage it more easily, as practitioners often believe that younger children have few memories of their birth families and have relationships which are poor or limited. Neil's research found that only when there was an existing attachment relationship between children and their birth families was face-to-face contact considered by the social worker as imperative.

Neil cites Howe (1998) and Triseliotis et al. (1997) when she says that 'Younger children tend to experience fewer difficulties in attaching to adopters than do older placed children' (p10). She goes on to qualify this point: 'Research reinforces what we know from experience: that the younger the child [is] at placement the more adaptable he or she is to the adoptive situation in particular but also to a whole range of wider experiences' (p10). So in Neil's view the young, adaptable child who has made good attachments to his or her adopters is better able to cope well with contact and use it optimally.

Drawing from these findings Neil puts forward the uncommon and possibly most important and valuable view, that the young child with no attachment to birth relatives, who has either never lived with them or who left their care before a year old or so, may find contact less problematic than it is for the child who has strong, emotional but insecure attachments to birth relatives. Neil and colleagues had found this to be the case when comparing the reactions to contact of older children (mean age eight) in longterm foster care with the adopted children in this study placed at age three and under. Whilst many of the fostered children both wanted and needed to have face-to-face contact with their birth relatives, meetings were highly emotional and the children had difficulties in managing their feelings.

In contrast to the eight-year-old fostered children, three-quarters of the adopters of the younger children told Neil that their child had either positive or neutral reactions to contact. About half the sample were children who displayed neutral responses to contact; their relationship with the birth relative was reported as not 'special'. Adopters described their child's neutral responses to Neil as, '...it goes over her

head ...', 'She has no clue as to who they are ...', 'It is just a visit.' Or, 'to him it is like meeting one of our friends really. It's the same situation' (p11). Neil says: 'This fits in with other studies of young adopted children' – that the relationship that develops with birth relatives through contact is likely to be more as it would be with an aunt or friend of the family than a close relative or parent (Iwanek 1987, and Rockel and Ryburn 1988, cited on p11).

Discussion of Neil's findings

Neil's statement that young children placed for adoption usually adjust, adapt and attach to their adopters more quickly and easily than older children, is supported by other studies (Thoburn et al. 1991, Ryburn 1992); this is also generally the experience of adoption practitioners. However, it may be that these children have questions to ask of their birth and adoptive parents and further adjustments to make when they reach middle childhood, a time when their understanding of adoption issues becomes much greater (Brodzinsky et al. 1984). It would be most interesting to re-interview the birth and adoptive parents at this stage, and also to interview the children who had not been interviewed for this study because of their young age.

Neil's comparison of the older foster children and the young adopted children does not seem quite valid. Clearly she wanted to compare the different responses to contact at different ages and backgrounds, to make her point that younger children with little or no attachment to birth relatives responded better to contact. However, the comparison of fostered and adopted children is not comparing like with like. Adopted children tend to feel more secure from the strong feelings of bonding with their adopters, as well as from the legal security that adoption bestows (Smith and Logan 2004). Practitioners also often find that attachment in adoptive placements seems more secure. We know that young children's understanding of their circumstances is often greater than they are able to articulate. On the other hand, older children in longterm foster care may be insecure not only from their past experiences but also at times from the comings and goings over the years of other foster children. They wonder if they too might need to leave. So using older-placed adopted children might have been a truer comparison.

The overall findings of Neil's study were that half the sample children were neutral about contact with their birth relatives, a quarter were anxious, and the remaining quarter were enjoying contact. It must be kept in mind that the experience of contact may change for all these groups. It might improve, or deteriorate, or stay the same, with time and changing circumstances. An implication for practice seems

to be that contact should nearly always be considered, provided that the uniqueness of each child and the child's individual needs and circumstances are taken into account, and the contact should be reviewed when necessary, as well as when legally required.

All the children who were enjoying contact had a positive relationship with their birth relatives and were able to remember them between meetings. For some of these children contact was maintaining an already established relationship with their birth family, but for others it was used as a means of *building* a relationship (Neil's italics). These findings may be of great importance. It could be that contact was enjoyable just because it was already established, and we know this is often the case with older children and is the very reason in the first place for its continuance. Perhaps more importantly, it should be asked how much the children's existing attachment to their birth relatives influenced later the good contact with and attachment to both birth and adoptive parents. This existing attachment may have been more important than the fact that these children did not, it seemed, come into the category of *not* having an insecure attachment or of having *no* attachment to their birth family. That is, they had a secure base on which to build attachments with their adoptive parents.

Neil's contention that young children with no existing attachment to their birth parents, and probably with no insecure attachment, are likely to have less problematic contact, seems to be supported by these findings. However, we must be mindful that half the children were reported by their adopters to be only neutral about contact. Although this is not negative, neither is it positive or an indicator of enjoyable contact. And a quarter of the children were anxious about contact. It may be that some children had made positive attachments with their foster carers between leaving their birth parents and being placed with adopters. We are not told if this was the case or for which children.

The findings of Neil's study about sense of belonging and attachment seem to be in agreement with my hypotheses. Her general interest in the minutiae of attachment and complex contact arrangements was most useful to me as I reflected on my research questions.

Neil adds to our knowledge of face-to-face contact with her valuable finding that some young children comfortably managed contact with their birth relatives. This has implications for practice, which currently tends to advocate face-to-face contact for older children with positive existing attachments to their birth family. Fratter

(1996: 13) lends support here: 'Practitioners in the UK have been particularly wary of continuing face-to-face contact in the placement of babies and young children, fearing confusion on the part of the child and interference with attachment.' Neil's findings may need to be replicated and the sample followed up to validate the study further. Nevertheless it may encourage practitioners to consider face-to-face contact for younger-placed adoptive children with no existing relationships with their birth families. This may give these children a chance to build relationships, as some children in Neil's study were doing. This may benefit them especially with siblings, as we know from Quinton et al. (1998) and Howe and Feast (2000) that relationships between siblings are most important to them, and are often the most consistent and longest-lasting. Contact can give them a better understanding of their past, help them to integrate it with the present and future, and in turn help them to promote their attachments and identity.

Smith, C. and Logan, J. (2004) After adoption: direct contact and relationships. London: Routledge.

This study of 61 adoptive families and 96 of their adopted children is well crafted, and impressive in its methodology and its comprehensive coverage of direct contact and relationships. Smith and Logan interviewed parents, were keen to hear the voices of the 51 children, and gain the views of another eight children from a written exercise; they also interviewed a subsample of 12 triangles – groups of adoptive and birth relatives and children.

They begin by putting adoption in the context of openness and the changing face of adoption over the last century. The benefits and detriments of openness are discussed, and whether it is essential for children's well-being. Smith and Logan refer to earlier and recent studies by central researchers in the field, concluding that 'some argue that post-adoption contact is vital for children's well-being and sense of identity, others suggest that little is known about its long-term effects' (p17). Their study is realistic and positive about contact but also sprinkled with caution, and notes that other evidence from research on post-adoption contact is equivocal and contested (p53).

The complex practicalities and emotional impact of contact are examined, as are the roles of the agency and the judiciary. Smith and Logan are interested in the conditions and specific forms of post-adoption contact that might benefit children and their adoptive and birth parents. They also examine policy and law in the

context of openness; indeed they have left few issues unturned in the field of post-adoption contact.

Their main aims were:

- To understand the significance of adoption for those people most closely affected by this legal arrangement.
- To identify the advantages and disadvantages of direct contact from the perspectives of adoptive parents, adopted children, and birth family members.
- To identify what kinds of factors influence the extent to which direct contact is experienced as beneficial or otherwise for those most closely involved.
- To understand the impact of direct contact on the lives of adoptive families, children and birth families.
- To learn lessons for policy and practice about circumstances which indicate that direct post-adoption contact is likely to be beneficial for children, and those which suggest contact should be avoided.

Smith and Logan found that the legal impact of the adoption order was most significant to those affected, giving adopters legal security and permanence; but also 'adoption constructs parenthood' (p105). Children felt happy, safe, loved, and secure about staying in their adoptive family. Birth mothers were distressed and angry; four of the six birth mothers interviewed said they accepted their children's adoptions, but the authors felt that three were ambivalent in their acceptance. All 18 birth grandparents were satisfied with the adoption. An interesting finding on the legal effects was that some former foster carers who had adopted, became less comfortable with contact after adoption.

Thirtyfive families perceived direct contact as advantageous to themselves, their children and the birth relatives. Twenty families thought contact advantaged their children and the birth relatives, but not themselves. Three families felt that only birth relatives benefited from contact. Adopters perceived the main advantages as: gaining information about their children's origins; current and ongoing news and information which facilitated conversations about the birth family with their children; keeping the door open for possible later contact with other birth relatives; showing an interest in and including, rather than excluding, the birth family; and maintaining or encouraging bonds between siblings.

Some disadvantages of direct post-adoption contact were perceived by adopters. One was their children's qualms and worries over siblings placed elsewhere. So the adopters worried on behalf of their children, and consequently emphasised the advantages of contact to the birth siblings rather than to their own adopted children. Adopters sometimes found contact uncomfortable because of the different lifestyle, behaviour and language of the birth siblings or relatives. A few families had complex arrangements which were perceived as having both advantages and disadvantages. For example, two teenage adopted sisters had contact with a birth sister, who caused significant distress by excluding one of the sisters.

Factors were found which influenced the extent to which direct post-adoption contact was experienced as beneficial or otherwise to those closely involved. Social work support was perceived as both beneficial and detrimental, and varied between agencies. Some adopters felt they were 'just left to get on with it'. Others thought that having contact was a condition of approval. Preparation was perceived positively by the majority, but was often not specific enough; although they were prepared cognitively, adopters were unprepared for the realities and emotional impact of contact. Emphasising children's needs alone cannot achieve contact. Adopters felt that hearing about likely benefits of contact from adopters who had experienced it, was helpful, as was hearing from adoptees without contact. Adopters were fearful of the 'dynamics' of contact, but meeting birth relatives prior to contact was regarded as highly significant, and dispelled their fears. Preparation was vital and should include encouragement to acknowledge and discuss anxieties. Those adopters who could identify with some life experience of birth relatives, such as loss, were more comfortable with contact. 'Many adoptive parents decided to maintain direct contact because they thought any discomfort or short-term problems were outweighed by long-term benefits for their children' (p103).

Unsurprisingly, all the birth relatives interviewed described advantages such as seeing the children grow up and having the reassurance that they were happy and well. However, they did still experience uncomfortableness over their changed roles in the children's lives.

Children generally perceived contact as satisfactory and comfortable, and their feelings were in accord with those of their adopters. Some children, as well as being aware of the benefits of contact, could also be uncomfortable with the meetings, but still wanted the contact. Others were afraid and anxious about it but

seemed to cope with this on their own. Some were distressed by the separation from their birth families and particularly by having no contact with their birth parents.

This study is most helpful with its insights and understanding of contact issues. The careful analysis of the findings clearly showed a good outcome for adoption with direct contact. On the whole, adopters, children and especially birth families were satisfied and comfortable with contact. The majority of participants were aware of its benefits. However, it was not without its less positive impact: the uncomfortable feelings for many of those involved, expressed particularly by some adopters and children.

Smith and Logan's implications for policy and practice are important for practitioners:

- There is a security that only an adoption order can give to adopters and children.
- Adopters' morale in their parenting role must be promoted.
- Contact arrangements should be considered by agencies and the judiciary in an ongoing way, and courts should view compulsory orders with caution.
- Adopters need preparation which alerts them to the initial, ongoing and changing emotional and practical difficulties of contact, and does not just persuade them that contact benefits their children. And children and birth families need more comprehensive preparation for contact.
- Practitioners must consider the purpose of contact, particularly as contact more frequent than four to six times annually is likely to be problematic, as are meetings at Christmas and birthdays.
- Thorough discussion between those involved, and good recording and distribution of contact arrangement documents, create clarity about the purpose of contact and everyone's responsibilities.
- Access to support and mediation over contact is a necessity.
- Thorough assessment of the needs of the children and adopters is required, to find the most appropriate form of contact for their temperament and abilities.
- The losses and consequent emotions of those in the adoption circle require the development of understanding by practitioners.

The generally good outcome for adopters and children with contact, one of the clear messages of Smith and Logan, is in accordance with Howe (1996), Thomas et al. (1999) and Triseliotis (2000). Smith and Logan also flag up the complexity of sibling

contact, which is often viewed as an easier option. Siblings and grandparents are the birth relatives most frequently involved in direct contact, and grandparents the most positive. On the other hand, birth mothers are perceived with more uncomfortableness by adopters, and their link is more often by mediated letterbox contact. The finding on the power of the adoption agency in shaping attitudes to contact agrees with Fratter (1996), Macaskill (2002) and Neil (2004). The finding that adopters, whilst being aware of the benefits of contact, had some reservations, was supported by Quinton et al. (1998), and so were Smith and Logan's cautions. Triseliotis (2000) and Neil (2004) support the finding that meetings with the birth mother dispelled adopters' anxieties.

The strengths of this research are its accessibility, its informative findings and its implications for practice. It contributes unique findings on the complexities of sibling contact. It shows the power of agencies in promoting the benefits of contact and influencing adopters, but not preparing them for the emotional and practical realities of contact. The methodology and analysis were sound and consistent. For example, Smith and Logan interviewed each adoptive parent in a couple separately and found their perceptions to be similar; most studies, like mine, interview a couple jointly.

The general message of this study was a positive one about adoption and direct contact. Ninety percent of children were unequivocally happy about adoption and relationships in their adoptive family. Seventy-eight percent had a positive view of their comfortableness and satisfaction with contact with all birth relatives, although some also had ambiguous feelings.

Neil, E. (2004) The 'Contact after Adoption' study: indirect contact and adoptive parents' communication about adoption. In: Neil, E. and Howe, D. Contact in adoption and permanent foster care: research, theory and practice. London: BAAF.

Neil's study 'explores how indirect contact works (or doesn't work) in helping adoptive parents to help their child with identity issues. It also explores how adopters communicate about adoption, how indirect contact is viewed and used by adopters and how this relates to broader parenting characteristics, and how effective this type of contact is as a means of information exchange' (p46). Neil's sample of 33 adoptive parents and their 48 children was drawn from the larger study in 1996-7 at the University of East Anglia, 'Contact after Adoption.'

Neil begins by outlining the reasons for contact, that the child may learn that her birth family still cares about her and that the adopters care about the birth family. Adoptive parents and the child gain information and a better understanding of the child's background, which can aid communication between all participants.

Neil's three main findings:

- Indirect contact is the 'standard' plan for young adopted children.
- Indirect contact can be an effective means for all parties to learn more about each other, but many hurdles have to be overcome for this to happen.
- Adopters who can put themselves in the place of their child and the birth family, are more likely to sustain contact, involve the child in the contact, and communicate openly with her child about adoption.

It seems that this 'standard' plan for young adopted children came about because social workers considered that face-to-face contact is only suitable when there is an existing relationship with birth relatives; without this, direct contact was thought to be ineffectual and unnecessary. While this seems logical and understandable, it is not supported by research one way or the other. Nevertheless, the usual plan was for indirect letterbox (mediated) contact to help with identity formation. Yet Neil's 2002 study (reviewed earlier) shows that the very lack of a relationship eases the emotional business of face-to-face contact.

Whether indirect contact can be an effective means for all participants to learn more about each other, depends largely on the quality of information. Some particular factors are the amount, type and accuracy of available information exchanged, and communication at three levels: between the adoptive parents and the birth family, between the adoptive parent and the child about the birth family, and directly between the birth family and the child. Analysis showed that type of contact was less important than the quality of information exchange. In some cases indirect contact was working well to facilitate communication on all three levels. These positive families usually identified these benefits for themselves and their child:

- being able to answer the child's questions and fill in gaps in her story;
- gaining a deeper, richer understanding of her birth history;
- being able to show her – either now or in future – that she is not forgotten or rejected by her birth family.

Good outcomes, however, were not inevitable. Whilst both face-to-face and indirect reciprocal contact enabled understanding and communication, the quality of information exchange could vary within both types. Neil cites Grotevant et al. (in the same volume), and says, 'there is no one arrangement that is best for everyone' (p53). There were some salient links between contact type and the quality of information exchange achieved. In particular, although indirect contact sometimes achieved a good information exchange, many stumbling blocks were encountered on the way:

- The rules and mechanics of letter exchange created problems.
- Birth relatives did not respond.
- The child was excluded.
- Parties did not know what to write.

For example, in some cases although the stated plan was indirect contact, no letters were ever sent by either set of parents. The practice of agencies mediating letterbox contact varied enormously. Letters may be checked, photocopied and sent on automatically, or they may have to be requested or collected; delays were often experienced; letters crossed over, which inhibited natural dialogue between the families.

In almost all cases the nonresponding party was the birth relative. When responses were erratic, this could be either the adoptive parents or the birth relatives. Adopters with an empathic view of the birth relative could understand the lack of response. Many of Neil's sample felt that one-way contact with birth relatives was beneficial to all participants. Some felt that it was primarily to help the birth family, and they were happy to do so. Others were glad or relieved that contact was only one-way. One mother felt 'a right mess' (p56) every year at the time of writing to the birth mother; for this adoptive mother contact undermined her role. She had complex and contradictory feelings: she regretted the nonresponse of the birth mother, but wanted any response that came to be held on file, as she felt it would be unsettling for her and her daughter.

Adopters can choose what they do and do not disclose to their child from indirect contact, and when. Neil found, as did Macaskill (2002), that adopters did not necessarily involve their children in the contact. This seemed to be part of a general pattern in the behaviour and views of some adopters, particularly in the way they handled communication about adoption. Those who were at ease and able to talk about adoption with their children, would also involve them in contact, and vice

versa. The author asked adopters a number of pertinent questions about their style of communicating about adoption with their children, and what they communicated. She is planning to analyse this variable from the interview data sometime in the future.

Great variations in communication were found between adopters. Some talked about it a great deal, bringing up the subject and keeping it open within the family. They used opportunities from television, magazines and books and their own family story, slipping references to their adoption into the conversation appropriately, but as one mother said, 'not in a big emotional way.' Neil makes the point that adopters have to take responsibility for raising the subject.

Conversely, other adopters who responded openly to children's questions and talked openly and at length, did not see this as required; rather it was led by the child's *expressed* questions (Neil's italics), and if not questioned the adopters felt that maybe the subject was better left alone. Other adopters were different again; they felt it was better for the child if they kept talk about adoption to the minimum. 'Just why introduce the issue ... it's a nonsense really. They need a happy, carefree childhood. They don't want to have to think about those kind of things ... Why should you?' (p59).

Other factors which influenced parents' decisions about talking to children and involving them in contact, included: the child's characteristics; reluctance to talk about the past and about the indirect contact; overtalkativeness; curiosity or anxiety; avoidance, upset and sadness.

Neil raises the issue of children finding out later and feeling that they have been excluded or betrayed. With direct contact the parents do not encounter the same difficult choices, since meetings have to be discussed beforehand, during and afterwards, which necessitates communication about the birth family and between the families. But indirect contact can literally be put away in a drawer (p60).

One or both of the adoptive parents and birth relatives found letters were of an unsatisfactory quality and ineffective in establishing helpful dialogue. Adoptive parents particularly wanted more information about birth relatives' background and current lives, as they often had no idea how the birth mother's life had moved on. Adopters felt awkward about their own comfortable lifestyle and holidays while the birth mother found it hard to afford food, let alone a holiday. They did not want to

boast, but they did want the birth mother to know that her child was enjoying life and doing well.

When adoptive parents and birth relatives of the same child were both interviewed, Neil found serious misunderstandings, because the families found it difficult to communicate. These misunderstandings were far less common in face-to-face contact, as it provided spontaneous, direct answers to questions, and notions about each other could easily be resolved. Neil encountered the widely held assumption that face-to-face contact is not necessary and perhaps not desirable for young adopted children who have not established an attachment to their birth relatives; direct contact was not considered a help to a child with longterm issues of loss and identity. Indirect contact is the norm for these young children. But Neil shows that it is often a complex option, neither easy nor spontaneous.

The benefits of indirect contact depend on the child's understanding of her background and on the behaviour and experience of the participants. Also crucial is clear and sensitive agency involvement, to begin the contact and keep it going. Neil questions the effectiveness of indirect contact, but identifies some factors that make for a good outcome:

- a high level of competence;
- commitment by both families;
- efficient exchange of letters by agencies;
- understanding by adoptive parents of how adoption affects child and birth family;
- longterm support for both families, especially birth relatives.

Neil's three main implications for practice:

- indirect contact should not be considered an 'easy' option;
- all parties may need ongoing support to maintain contact and communicate effectively;
- systems for managing letterbox contact need to be clear, efficient and appropriate to the case.

A strength of this study is that it concentrates on, clarifies and confirms the complexity of indirect contact, and identifies factors that increase its effectiveness. Neil's three main findings are in accordance with those of Macaskill (2002). I would like to have known the numbers or percentages of respondents with different views

on the advantages and disadvantages of indirect contact; some tables would have been helpful.

Brodzinsky, D. (2005) Reconceptualizing openness in adoption: implications for theory, research and practice. In: Brodzinsky, D.M. and Palacios, J. (eds) Psychological issues in adoption: research and practice, Westport, CT: Praeger.

Brodzinsky's comprehensive and scholarly contribution on rethinking openness in adoption is thorough, innovative and informative. It encourages one to rethink dearly held beliefs and consider his new concepts about openness. He gives a good account of the history of openness from the perspective of the United States, which is generally in accord with that of Britain. 'There can be little doubt that adoption, as a social service practice, is moving decidedly towards increased openness not only in the United States and Canada but in many European countries as well' (p145). His supporting references include a British study by Sykes, and originally in a draft also included Fratter. In the context of my study, and others concerned with adoption, openness and contact, this paper is highly relevant.

Pros and cons of openness

Brodzinsky acknowledges that although contact is now generally the norm it is not universally accepted as a good thing. He is even-handed with critics and supporters, highlighting caution and concerns about possible insecurities and about the lack of entitlement felt by adoptive parents. For birth parents, the concerns are that contact may interfere with the processes of loss, grief and adjustment. Critics have had concerns about the influence of contact on the security of the adopted child's attachment and also on her self-esteem, identity and overall psychological adjustment.

On the other hand US supporters of open adoption feel that it is morally right to replace secrecy with openness and that doing so will advantage those in the adoption triangle. It could lessen the qualms of each family about the other, promote a more realistic and empathic understanding of the birth parents by adopters, and give the birth mother some knowledge and control to help her come to terms with her grief. They propose that the advantages of openness for the child will be minimising her sense of loss and rejection, as openness will engender a better understanding about her background and the circumstances of her adoption, and promote her self-esteem and psychological adjustment.

While noting that research on the influence of open adoption is still limited, Brodzinsky says that data suggest that there are more advantages than disadvantages in having contact and that ‘... most adoptive parents who choose an open adoption are quite satisfied with the arrangement and generally have positive relationships with their child’s birth parents’ (p147). Much of the above is in accord with British research covered earlier in this literature review.

The largest, most prominent and most respected studies of openness in the US have been carried out by Grotevant and colleagues. Their longitudinal study draws its huge sample from cases where the adopted children were placed as babies under a year old and the birth mothers planned the adoption with these families; there was a range of openness options. Families and birth mothers with confidential (closed, no contact) adoptions were most difficult to locate, resulting in only 12 families out of 190 and 20 birth mothers out of 169 (Grotevant and McRoy 1998: 68). So the majority of these adoptions had more positive beginnings than those encountered by the British researchers reviewed above. My perception is that perhaps in the US they have a more optimistic, less cautious perception of contact than in Britain, where the studies usually include older children from complex backgrounds who are often anxious and angry with birth relatives; and the birth relatives in turn have little support with the complexities of contact, have never met the adopters, are unable to reciprocate mediated letterbox contact, and sometimes have not come to terms with the loss of their parenting role. Moreover it is helpful to remember all this as we further examine the conceptualisation of openness in this American paper.

Communicative openness

Good adoptive parenting in Brodzinsky’s view consists of parental warmth, emotional sensitivity, nurturance, involvement, stimulation, support, and communicative openness, all of which play a much more important role in children’s psychological development than a single- or two-parent family, and so on. Also ‘regardless of whether a child grows up in a traditional closed or open adoption arrangement, what is primary for healthy psychological adjustment is the creation of an open, honest, nondefensive, and emotionally attuned family dialogue not only about adoption-related issues but in fact about any issue that impacts on the child’s and family’s life. In my view, this is the essence of openness in adoption ...’ (p151). This view of Brodzinsky’s has most important implications for practice and for

research, including mine, in which I examine the families with and without contact in the light of this paper.

The essence of much of Brodzinsky's work can be seen in the form of two hypothetical examples and analyses of families (see chapter 7). One family is an open arrangement but is structurally closed; the other family is a traditionally closed adoption but is structurally open. The open family does not communicate in an open and comfortable way although it has contact, so in effect it is closed. The other family has no contact but uses the information it has to best effect, in an open, facilitating and comfortable way, making it easy for their child to communicate worries and questions about her background.

The purpose of Brodzinsky's paper is, through his reconceptualisation of openness in adoption, to broaden research and practice perspectives on this construct, and to offer some speculations on the variability in outcomes for families choosing different adoption arrangements (p149).

Assumptions underlying openness

Brodzinsky discusses ten assumptions about openness. First, openness is best understood as a communicative continuum (Grotevant et al. 1999). At one end are those with the willingness and generosity of spirit to examine and consider adoption issues in their family lives, to share their thoughts and feelings with others, and to be empathically attuned to those around them. At the other end are those who are reticent about acknowledging and discussing adoption issues and who are blocked from their own and others' feelings about them. Brodzinsky's reconceptualising of openness takes into account that there will be a diverse range of children, adopters and birth relatives across this communicative continuum.

Second, adoption and its implications are explored by those involved at three levels. At the intrapersonal level each person imagines, feels, and thinks about the issues for her or himself; this is a lifelong process. At the intrafamilial level each family considers the issues among the family members, especially adoptive parents with their children. At the interfamilial level, exploration of issues needs to take place between the birth and adoptive families, in open, honest, respectful and emotionally sensitive ways, and it needs to be ongoing (p153). Moreover, this self-exploration and communication must be carried out whether the adoption is confidential (with no contact) or open (with some form of contact). Although none of this is surprising or

new it strikes us as important and true and helps us make sense of the theory of adoption communication openness.

Third, it is not enough simply to exchange information to achieve openness. It is crucial to enable children to express their feelings and ask questions about their adoption. And children must be supported in their emotions of confusion, frustration, grief and anger, particularly where their background is complex or there is little information available.

Fourth, it is assumed that individuals with a more 'open, empathic, and secure personality style' (p153) are more likely to choose a structurally open adoption arrangement, as well as being able to carry out the tasks of adoptive parenting identified above. Conversely, individuals with more 'closed, cautious and self-protective personality style' (p153) can be expected to choose an arrangement with less contact and to encounter more difficulties with creating an open, unguarded family environment in which they and their children are able to communicate comfortably.

Fifth, the extent of communicative openness created at any one time within the adoptive kinship system reflects the evolving needs of all participants within the system – adoptive parents, birth family, and especially the adoptive child. Over time as these needs change for the individual, so may the degree of openness also change.

Sixth, the extent of communication will change with changing needs and children's developing understanding. At about six to eight years children will need information about the circumstances of their adoption, and as teenagers will require further searching for identity-forming information. So communication between the two families may increase at such times. (Brodzinsky's levels of understanding are explained in chapter 5). In the case of closed adoptions new information may or may not be found, and must be dealt with appropriately.

Seventh, sometimes the participants in adoption are in accord and able to tolerate their varying needs, and sometimes their needs or the timing will be in conflict. Unsurprisingly, Brodzinsky points out how satisfactory it is when the former takes place. I assume the latter would result in dissatisfaction which could be difficult to resolve.

Eighth, the quality of communication and degree of openness within each family and between the two families, reflects the influence of individuals on one another. Those whose attitudes and presentation show greater openness and communication, set an example for others. Those whose attitudes are insensitive and closed could impede adoption communication in conversations with other individuals.

Ninth, Brodzinsky assumes that 'although the adoption communication process is assumed to be reciprocal, from a developmental perspective it is expected that children's attitudes, curiosity and openness in adoption initially will reflect the attitudes and openness of the adoptive parents rather than vice versa' (p155). Triseliotis (1973, 2000) and Howe and Feast (2000) would support this.

Tenth, the level of satisfaction of adoption participants is related to how their needs and desires were met concerning openness at the various lifestages. This in turn is predicative of a healthy psychological adjustment both in the individuals and the family system. When these needs are not met, this could be detrimental to those individuals and families involved.

History of the theory of openness

After this reconceptualisation of openness Brodzinsky goes on to identify Kirk (1964) as the founding father of adoption communication openness. Kirk was the first to observe and explore family dynamics and the first to emphasise the importance of open communication. He created an awareness of the need for openness in adoption in an era of secretiveness and closed adoptions where there was little or no direct contact with the birth family.

Bronfenbrenner (1992) put forward a developmental ecological theory. He emphasised the contextualistic and interactionist nature of human development, and concentrated on relationships and the mutual influence that occurs between the various subsystems of the adoption kinship networks.

The theory of adoption communication openness has also been much influenced by Grotevant, McRoy and their colleagues, who developed the Family Adoption Communication (FAC) model. This uses and develops some of the concepts in Brodzinsky's paper, and many of the assumptions above parallel those underlying the FAC model.

Brodzinsky's own theory, although influenced by adoption theory and research, has its roots in his clinical and consultative work, in which parental empathy, and the capacity for reflecting and supporting children's emotional states, are seen as crucial goals of intervention. The FAC model makes more of the connection between structural openness and communicative openness; Brodzinsky tends to 'deemphasize this connection' (p158).

Conclusion to Brodzinsky

In this paper the essence of openness in adoption is not the extent or range of contact that families might or might not experience. Rather it is the quality of adoption exploration and communication that is accomplished, individually, as a family, and between the birth and adoptive families. Most important of all is the honest, open, attuned communication between the adoptive parents and their adopted child.

Literature review: conclusion

The overwhelming theme from the literature was that contact for some children was enjoyed and seemingly beneficial because of the information, explanations, reassurances and apologies that it brought forth, which in turn helped with the children's sense of identity and their positive attachment to their adoptive parents. However, this was not the case for all the children all the time.

Some circumstances that promote beneficial contact are open and ongoing communication between the participants, which incorporates compromise and negotiation, and contact with birth relatives other than the birth mother, which is easier to manage. The opposites of these hindered positive contact. Smith and Logan, (2004: 172-173) and Macaskill (2002: 74-75) outline these further. Moreover, contact should not be reintroduced between a traumatised child and the maltreating parent (Howe and Steele 2004: 220). There is a need for reassessment, flexibility and change over time for each unique child. Resources for support and preparation not in place at the time of the research reviewed were implemented on 30 December 2005 (see chapter 8).

Some other common themes were: the failure to listen to children, which may link with lack of preparation; the use of lifestory books which explain background and explore feelings and wishes; the fact that siblings placed together do better than those placed singly; the fact that agencies and social workers are quite powerful in

shaping attitudes to contact and openness. A further common finding is the complexity of connections between the previous experiences of adoptive and birth parents and children, and the way in which these experiences affect their views of adoption and each other.

My questions were partly addressed by most of the studies. For instance, children and adoptive parents felt that contact had promoted self-esteem and identity, and had not hindered, in most cases, attachment relationships. However, there was little comment on the effects of no contact on these important issues.

Since contact seems to promote identity, self-esteem and a sense of belonging, does the lack of contact result in a poor sense of identity, self-esteem and belonging?

The pendulum has swung from no contact to openness, including contact even for infants and young children with no previous relationship with their birth relatives. However, Quinton et al. (1998), Macaskill (2002) and Smith and Logan (2004) advise caution. Will we see the pendulum swing back nearer to the centre of its arc? Let us hope that it will swing the best way for each individual child and her or his individual needs.

Chapter 4

Attachment and identity

Introduction

Contact, attachment and identity are the three key concepts in my research, and key processes in adoptive families. Secure attachment and the development of a sense of identity are essential to a child's wellbeing, as this chapter will show. Contact currently is the norm in adoption, and is the focus of this study; and the possible implications of contact with birth families for the attachment and identity of adopted children are set out here.

Contact is fundamentally about relationships, about the making, managing, sustaining and sometimes breaking of affectional bonds, and contact affects how each child and adult in the adoption and contact circle relates to the other. The questions arise about whether or not the newly gained or developing attachment with adoptive parents will be shaken by contact, and about the degree to which the child can, through contact, develop a different attachment relationship with her birth relatives, more like that with aunts or uncles or friends, as found by Neil (2004: 18). Some children may not want contact because of earlier experiences with birth parents. For these children contact may impede attachment to their adopters (Howe and Steele 2004: 220). Over time each party's circumstances may change as well as their need for contact, so that, for example, some of these children in adolescence may wish a one-event contact to address the abuse and to get answers to questions about their identity.

It is not at all easy to connect contact with the promotion of attachment; this is clear already from the overview of research in chapter 2 and the literature review in chapter 3. However, attachment theory provides a means for understanding the influence of contact on attachment and vice versa. Attachment theory is an essential framework for my study, as children who need adoption are usually children with insecure attachments, whose birth parents have abused them or have been unable to care for them well enough as their parents too have not had good-enough parenting and have insecure attachments. Attachment theory helps me to understand adoptive and birth parents' ways of relating to each other and to the

children, and how they make sense of their children's behaviour and attachment patterns. It is my tool for understanding relationships in the context of adoptive family life and contact with the birth relatives.

Identity formation, like attachment, is fundamental to an infant's and child's development, wellbeing and psychological adjustment. Identity theory is most salient to my research because the findings of other studies of adopted people inform us that during early childhood the developmental factor that contributes most to identity formation is the quality of a child's relationship with and attachment to the primary carer(s) (Triseliotis 2000: 92). Thus there is a significant connection between attachment and identity.

In the context of adoption and contact, identity theory is crucial in considering the effects of early identity formation with the birth parents. Identity theory also helps us understand how adoptive parents promote a good sense of self in their child and help their child carry out the extra tasks of identity formation which adopted children have (Triseliotis 2000).

There is a clear link between contact and identity formation, as was shown by the research overview in chapter 2 and the literature review in chapter 3. Identity theory helps us consider the benefits of contact for identity formation, the benefits that come by way of the information learned from birth relatives and the interest and reassurance of this connection with the original family. Conversely, in the case of severely maltreated children, contact could be detrimental to their sense of identity. Identity theory is central to my examination of these factors.

Plan of the chapter

The first part of this chapter begins with an explanation of the beginnings of attachment itself. Then I examine the concept of the secure base and how a child explores from it, and then how the secure base and attachment behaviour persist throughout the lifespan. Next I explain the Strange Situation Test, which contributed much to attachment theory; bonding; the classification of kinds of attachment; and the inner working model. Then I summarise Bowlby's theory, and look at concepts closely connected with it: separation and loss, defensive strategies, and resilience.

Bowlby is the major figure in attachment theory and after his early work with children in the 1950s he devoted much of his life to the development of the theory. His theory is supported and developed by other and later researchers, such as

Ainsworth et al. (1978), Main (1995), Crittenden (1995), Heard and Lake (1997) and Heard (2001). Gilligan (1997) complements attachment theory with his work on resilience.

The second part of this chapter is about identity. I look at the definition of identity, the contributions of Erikson, Ryburn and Triseliotis, race and difference, and the connections between contact, attachment and identity.

Attachment

The beginnings of attachment

In Bowlby's view attachment may begin long before birth. Whilst the child is in the womb, the parents talk and sing to her, watch and feel her movements, and imagine their baby and their life together. Almost from the moment of birth attachment behaviour can be observed in the baby: she cries or gets upset when she needs food, comfort, touch, stimulation, and so on. So the mother, or main carer, responds; she coos, talks, smiles, teaches, and plays and sings with her baby. The baby in turn responds by gazing up into the mother's eyes, cooing and smiling, and copies the sounds and expressions of her mother or other attachment figures. In general, the baby responds and reciprocates in a way that shows she likes whatever the parent is doing.

Bowlby's theory is built around observing these interactions, which are not of high intensity, but are pleasurable to both mother and child, and become more complex and reciprocal as the child grows. The baby's needs are met when she is fed and receives attention. This pattern is repeated many times every day, and the baby learns to trust. These experiences of interest and mutual pleasure help a baby and child to develop self-esteem and a sense of self-efficacy.

As the child grows she too will begin to initiate this positive interaction cycle, and ideally the parent will respond, so continually building on the child's developing self-esteem. The more the baby has of such experiences, the more attached she will become and the more she is likely to feel lovable and worthwhile. In addition, she will be more stimulated for growth and change, and her intellectual development is likely to be greater.

'During the first year of life, the primary task for the baby is to build a sense of safety and security and trust in other human beings. When a parent wonders, "What should I do when ...?", the criterion for deciding should be, "What will help my child trust me?" ' (Fahlberg 1988: 85).

Clearly, to build attachment with a baby or child the parent or attachment figure needs to spend time, take interest, be warm, responsive, sensitive and reciprocal, be a good-enough parent, and be a good boss to the child, giving her flexible boundaries and routines to help her feel safe and secure. These are all things that

parents in the main want to do, look forward to and enjoy, and at the same time they are encouraging attachment and building what is called a secure base for her.

However, many of the birth parents whose children are currently placed for adoption, have had difficulty carrying out the attachment-promoting behaviour described above. They have experienced various forms of social deprivation, or mental ill-health, or drug or alcohol addiction, and have little or no family support (Howe et al. 1999: 203).

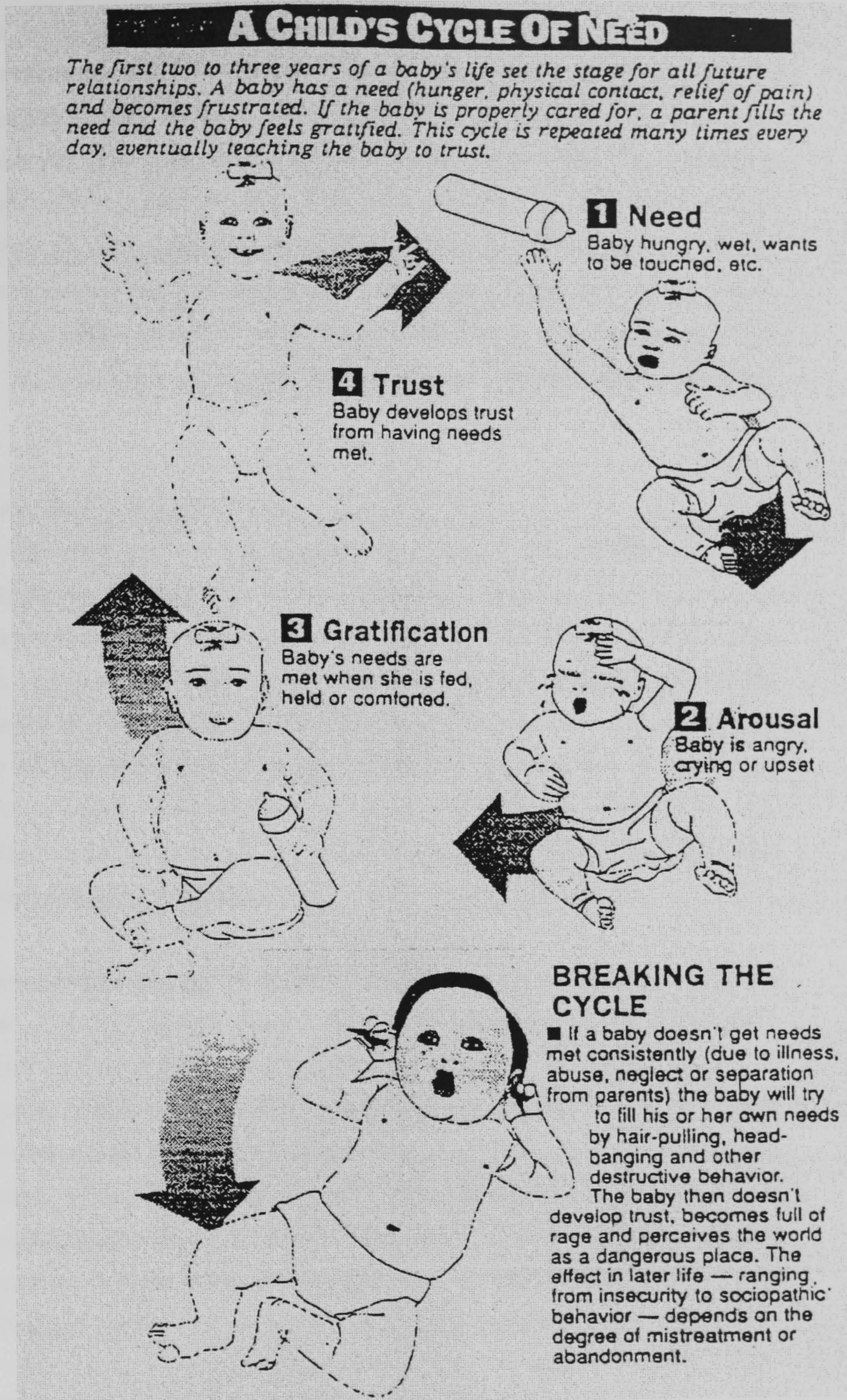
If the baby's needs are not met consistently (because of neglect, abuse, illness or separation) she will endeavour to meet her own needs, often by headbanging, hair-pulling, and other negative attention-seeking behaviour. She does not develop trust, becomes angry, and sees the world as a dangerous place (Keck 1995). 'If [children's] needs for security and affection are not met, they may not be able to give love or incorporate social values as they mature' (Fahlberg 1988: 85). The child's cycle of needs is illustrated in Figure 1 on the next page. These issues could also have an impact on post-adoption contact with the children.

The secure base and exploration

Mothers who provide a balanced, flexible use of caregiving, as described above, promote a secure base. As their infant matures the mother encourages the child to become independent with the secure base in the background. Having a secure base from which to explore, someone to rely on, encourages exploration and learning, and results in enjoyment and good self-esteem. Howe et al. (1999: 16) refer to Ainsworth et al. (1978), who 'suggested that the link between these two systems – attachment and exploration – might be captured by recognising that the infant uses the attachment figure as *a secure base from which to explore.*'

However, 'when attachment behaviour is high, exploratory behaviour, which encourages the child to learn about the environment, is low, and vice versa. In this apparently innocuous observation lies an important point. Children who experience continuous, regular or high levels of anxiety, for whatever reason, will have less time and energy to enjoy the benefits of exploration, enquiry and natural curiosity' (Howe et al. 1999: 16). So the child's learning, development and necessary adaptation to the environment will be hindered because of the lack of exploration.

Figure 1: A child's cycle of need



Reproduced with thanks to the sources: Gregory Keck, Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio, and Terry Levy, Miami Psychotherapy Institute.

As the baby matures and develops, so does her urge for independence, the beginning of exploring life and the world. 'The overriding task for the child from one to three years is to separate psychologically from the mother and to begin to develop self-confidence and self-esteem. When faced with a "What should I do when ...?" question about a child of this age, the criterion for deciding should be, "What will make my child feel more capable?" ' (Fahlberg 1988: 95). Initially a toddler likes her mother to be closeby whilst she explores; she will then venture further, reassured by the mother's voice, and when she learns that her mother can be relied upon to return she can explore further or feel secure with other known carers. Thus the child develops independence from the confidence of having a secure base. This is confirmed by Ainsworth's Strange Situation Test, examined below.

The secure base through the lifespan

In developing his concepts of the secure base and of the healthy nature of attachment behaviour, Bowlby found that 'Evidence is accumulating that human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise. The person trusted, also known as an attachment figure can be considered as providing his (or her) companion with a secure base from which to operate' (Bowlby 1979: 103). So needing an attachment figure is not just for children but also for adolescents and adults at different phases in their lives.

Early attachments and building of trust affect whether or not a person expects to find a secure base. Finding a secure base in turn depends on the ability to find good friends and partners, or in other words, to make secure, lasting relationships that enable a person to make and keep other relationships – and this is highly dependent on the attachment and trust achieved as an infant and child. Some children and adults, who have had a poor start with insecure attachments, may still form resilience through the interest of and a relationship with a new attachment figure, through their own persistence in problem-solving, and through success with tasks or talents. The theory of resilience is described later in this chapter.

In adulthood finding and making a relationship with a stable, responsive partner would seem to be a most powerful and positive way of building resilience and attachment. Quinton and Rutter (1988) found in their study of girls brought up in an institution, who presumably had some poor attachments, that the girls who made a

secure, lasting relationship with a sensitive, encouraging partner had better emotional adjustment than those who went from one relationship to another with (often) violent, insecure men.

It was Bowlby's view that at every age over the lifespan a person needs to be able to recognise the kind of people who will make a secure base. The relationship needs to be reciprocal, though not always simultaneous, and it is vital that the two get on in a way that is jointly fulfilling. However, a person with a poor relationship and attachment history may be anxious and may repeat attachment-seeking behaviour. Such a person may be clingy, demanding, angry, cool, and intense, and may consequently continue to be unable to form a reciprocal, rewarding relationship.

Most adopted children overcome this type of behaviour as they become attached to their adopters. It sometimes recurs after contact with birth parents, but back in the secure base it quickly peters out (Quinton et al. 1998). Paradoxically, Bowlby points out, the securely attached person with trust in self and others and the ability to make relationships is not as independent as we may suppose. Rather, this person is able to rely on others and also knows those on whom to rely (Bowlby 1979: 104).

Attachment behaviour through the lifespan

Bowlby always believed that attachment behaviour continues throughout our lifespan, although it has its roots in infancy. Bowlby tells us that 'it is a form of instinctive behaviour that develops in humans, as in other mammals, during infancy, and has as its aim or goal proximity to a mother-figure. The function of attachment behaviour, it is suggested, is protection from predators. Whilst attachment behaviour is shown especially strongly during childhood when it is directed toward parent figures, it none the less continues to be active during adult life when it is usually directed toward some active and dominant figure, often a relative but sometimes an employer or some elder of the community. Attachment behaviour, the theory emphasizes, is elicited whenever a person (child or adult) is sick or in trouble, and is elicited at high intensity when he is frightened or when the attachment figure cannot be found' (Bowlby 1979: 87).

Because attachment theory shows that this kind of attachment behaviour is normal, healthy and an innate part of children's and adults' makeup, it should not be considered as dependent, regressive or childish, but rather as designed to elicit appropriate healthy support when it is needed. Bowlby recognised that sometimes all was not lost if ideal attachments were not formed early on, but that with some

good fortune, and with interest and support from appropriate people, good attachments could be achieved later.

Heard and Lake (1997) and Heard (2001) further develop attachment theory through their work on adult relationships over the lifespan. Their adult attachment dynamic is an interpersonal dynamic or process which assists the development of children and parents, and which is active also in the relationship between adult careseekers and caregivers. From their viewpoint a family could be seen as a homeostatic system of relationships between people at different ages and stages who are cohesive because they share similar set goals. Their concepts will help my understanding of the adoptive parents' own relationship and the challenges made to it by the placement of children with difficult and demanding behaviour, and also the impact of contact on these relationships.

Their theory informs our understanding of the companionable interests that bring adults together, demonstrating how appropriate or inappropriate companionship can help or hinder people, who were formerly insecure, in forming secure attachments. Heard and Lake also give insights into how insecure children and adolescents sometimes make inappropriate short-term relationships, which may be promiscuous, with other insecure people.

Ainsworth's Strange Situation Test and the internal working model

Mary Ainsworth's work on the Strange Situation Test was the basis for the classification of secure and insecure forms of attachment and for Bowlby's development of internal working models. Her classification furthers our understanding of how children try to make sense of their relationship with their mother, and how this influences their expectations of others, that is, their internal working models. Her tools will be invaluable to my research in observing children's behaviour and relationships.

Bowlby (1979: 111) describes Ainsworth's findings from her 1978 study of 23 twelve-month-old infants at home and 56 in the Strange Situation Test. She observed how they behaved at home with and without the mother present and also in a slightly strange test situation. The findings show that with few exceptions both situations have much in common.

The test procedure is in seven stages (Howe et al. 1999: 32):

- 1) Mother and child are together in a room. The child has the opportunity to play with toys. The mother watches.
- 2) A stranger enters. After a while the stranger talks to the mother, then plays with the child.
- 3) The mother leaves the room. The stranger stays, and plays with the child.
- 4) The mother returns quickly, or as soon as the child is distressed. She settles the child. The stranger leaves.
- 5) The mother goes out again, leaving the child to play alone.
- 6) The stranger comes in again and tries to play with and comfort the child.
- 7) The mother returns soon, or as soon as the child is distressed. She settles the child. The stranger leaves.

The Strange Situation Test was developed and extended later through the work of Main (1995), Crittenden (1995), and Heard and Lake (1997).

Bowlby says, 'At least Ainsworth's findings show that an infant whose mother is sensitive, accessible, and responsive to him, who accepts his behaviour and is cooperative in dealing with him is far from being the demanding and unhappy child that some theories may suggest. Instead mothering of this sort is evidently compatible with a child who is developing a limited measure of self-reliance by the time of his first birthday combined with a high degree of trust in his mother and enjoyment of her company' (1979: 114). So the child with a secure base develops even by the first birthday some degree of independence, confidence to explore, trust, and self-esteem, and will be able to build relationships.

Rutter (1997) examined studies of the Strange Situation Test. He concluded that children from one to three were most likely to show distress when the mother left them in a strange situation. But older children were less likely to be distressed and were more quickly comforted when the mother returned. Rutter also examined the fears and anxieties felt by children throughout their childhood, and found in them an opportunity for further attachment to take place, as children seek and find sensitive responses to their fears from attachment figures.

Bonding

Rutter (1977) developed Bowlby's and Ainsworth's attachment theory by distinguishing between attachment behaviour and bonding. Infants tend generally to seek new attachments if familiar figures are absent (Robertson and Robertson 1971,

cited in Rutter 1977: 50). But bonding implies a *selective* attachment which persists over time, even over a period of no contact with the person with whom the bond exists (although of course an infant is much less able than an older child to maintain the bond). 'Bonding is best differentiated from attachment behaviour by the presence of *selectivity* in relationships which persist over time and place. The strength of bonding may be best determined by the degree of *reduction* of distress in a frightening situation when the bonded person is present' (p51).

This is salient in the context of adoption and contact, for instance when an older-placed child wishes to maintain an existing bond with a birth relative, or when an older child may wish to regain contact with siblings. And it may be that in a contact situation, the bond with an adoptive parent who is also present will reduce any distress.

Rutter makes a distinction between secure and insecure bonding. Bonding enables children to feel secure and to explore in strange situations, as is demonstrated in Ainsworth's test. The apparent 'purpose' of bonding is to give the child security in relationships in order to stop clinging and following, and in that sense to become detached (Rutter 1977: 51). Again the Ainsworth test bears this out, as secure children greet their mother positively on reunion, with less following, and on separation cry less than the insecure children.

Classification of attachment

From her observations of the infants' behaviour in both situations Ainsworth classified them initially into five main groups according to two criteria: (a) how much or how little they explore when in different situations, and (b) how they treat mother – when she is present, when she departs and when she returns. The original five groups were consolidated by Ainsworth into three types, and later work by Main and Solomon (1986) recognised a fourth type. The four types are these:

- Securely attached children miss their mother when she leaves, are readily comforted by her return, and play and explore with confidence, using her as a secure base, exchanging glances with her and enjoying contact with her (classified B).
- Insecure ambivalent children are much distressed by their mother's return, and cry and cling and express anger (classified C).
- Insecure avoidant children display little if any signs of missing their mother and avoid her on her return; their play is superficial (classified A).

- Disorganised-insecure children show features of A and C (classified D); often they are abused children whose first attachment figure is both the source of and the solution for distress.

Disorganised attachment

Main (1995) speaks powerfully about the kind of disorganised parenting that contributes to the distress of children with disorganised attachment. She helps us to understand the children in this classification, and why contact could perhaps interrupt further their formation of positive attachment with adoptive parents and others. Main also informs my understanding of how children's attachment patterns might affect contact and all the relationships involved in contact, especially for children in this disorganised category (D).

For children who do not have a secure base and who are avoidant, ambivalent or disorganised, self-esteem and the making of relationships are impaired. Main and her colleagues looked in more detail at how these children experience the Strange Situation Test:

During the test the child shows few signs of distress. 'The baby appears competent but affectless,' says Main (1995: 418). It appears that the child is using the toys as a ploy to minimise attachment behaviour, which upsets the baby's carer, and in the meantime the child manages to stay close to the carer. But while exhibiting no external distress, the child is experiencing internal emotional distresses without expressing them. Avoidant children control their own emotions and those of others with these tactics, which shut down their feelings and prevent the making and maintaining of close relationships; and these tactics tend to continue throughout the lifespan.

The disorganised child's predominant emotion is probably high anxiety or fear. It is the patterning of behaviour, rather than the attachment figure, which offers some sort of security in the A and C patterns. The child either alternates A and C patterns or attempts to integrate them in the A/C state (Main 1995: 452). Main says that abused children may display disorganisation around matters relating to abuse, but appear organised, if insecure, in other respects. It is also possible that direct maltreatment (a frightening parent) may be more likely to have damaging longterm consequences than a frightened (usually mentally ill) adult. The latter type of parental behaviour may leave the child feeling inexplicably powerful yet somehow bad or dangerous (Main 1995: 455).

Further development of attachment classifications

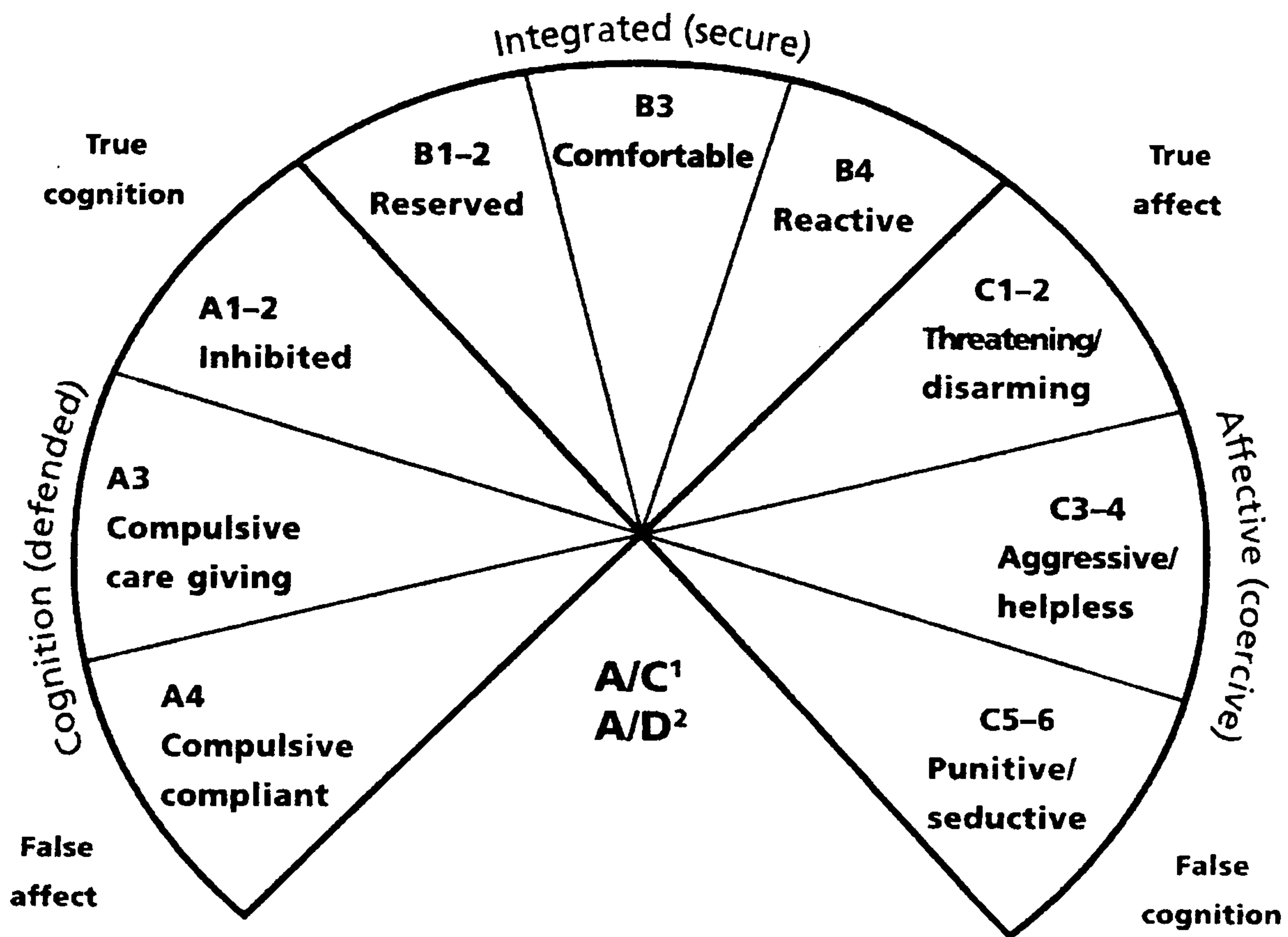
The work of Pat Crittenden (1995) also adds to Bowlby's and further develops the classifications of Ainsworth and Main (Figure 2 on the next page). She views the relation between quality of attachment and aspects of psychopathology from the perspective of information processing. While attachment is biologically based and unlearned, quality of attachment for Crittenden refers to a learned understanding of the nature of specific attachment relationships. She feels that three patterns of attachment are too few, as mothers are varied and can be split into good or bad by their infants. She goes on to look at how the child's increasing maturity changes relationships and how mothers provide a 'scaffold'. Her rethinking of Ainsworth's patterns of infant attachment as patterns of mental processing gives us another useful way of understanding children and parents and how they move from their original patterns to their current ones. Her view is that attachment figures protect children and provide the interpersonal setting in which children learn to use their minds. Like Main, she is concerned with children with disorganised patterns of attachment who have contact with frightening or frightened parents.

Crittenden's concepts will help me appreciate the relationships in my sample between the players involved in contact, the effects of contact on the children's attachment and identity, and when contact may be inappropriate. Crittenden's four classifications (A, B, C and A/C) and the type of caregiving these children have experienced are described in detail in Appendix 11.

Adults are often concerned about coercive children (C), who are sometimes fire setters, soilers, smearers, self-harmers and suicide attempters. Their concentration is poor and their school performance often weak and unsatisfactory, which sometimes results in exclusion. Their relationship with carers can become close but often has a destructive element. Their affect is high but their cognition low. Carers have difficulty enabling these children to consider their behaviour, and instead are left worrying about it.

Figure 2: Patterns of attachment

School-age patterns of attachment



- 1 Defended/coercive
- 2 Anxious/depressed

Reproduced with thanks from:

Crittenden, P. M. (1995) Attachment and psychopathology. In: Goldberg, S., Muir, R. and Kerr, J. *John Bowlby's Attachment Theory: Historical, Clinical and Social Significance*, New York: The Analytic Press.

Ambivalent children (also C) divide their carers into good and bad segments, which they are then unable to integrate. They may be relating segments of a parent of whom they have only vague memories and whom they are having difficulty in accepting or rejecting. Their high emotional levels, demanding love and attention and exhibiting anger, initially draw carers to them, but often end in rejection when the carers can no longer cope with their highly-charged emotional demands (Farnfield 1998: 82).

Crittenden gives an interesting angle on disorganised children. Her models show that these children, who are the ultimate extremes of A/C combinations, falsify both understanding and feelings. There are clear signs of such a development in the middle years, and by adolescence it can be recognisable as psychopathological behaviour (Crittenden 1995: 379-400). This assertion is supported by Rutter (1977).

Crittenden also includes an anxious depressed category in her model (A/D). These are children who seem to have developed extreme behaviour difficulties, and it seems they may consider suicide.

Crittenden has furthered the work of attachment theory in identifying children's attachment types, their internal working models (see below), their resulting behaviours, and how they might be matched with carers who can help them gain a more positive and trusting sense of themselves and others.

To summarise Crittenden, I quote from her own conclusion in *Attachment and Psychopathology* (1995): 'Many of the ideas I have expressed here go beyond the attachment theory that is familiar to us all. Have I strayed too far? How far should we stray from the secure base of Bowlby and Ainsworth? Maybe that depends on how secure we are. Bowlby and Ainsworth were both bold and integrative thinkers who conceptualized realities far beyond the range of the then familiar theories of human functioning. In that context, I like to think that Bowlby and Ainsworth would neither require, nor desire, that we retain unchanged all of their thinking. I think we best honour them by emulating their method of wide, mental exploration and bold, interrogative thought, particularly that which is clinically relevant to the relief of suffering of those who have experienced the least joy in human relationships (Bowlby 1988). In this chapter, which I offer as a small gift to Bowlby and Ainsworth in exchange for their gift to us all of a magnificent and living theory and a powerful methodology, I have sought to follow their lead' (Crittenden 1995: 402).

Internal working models

'Attachment theory holds that, within close relationships, young children acquire *mental representations*, or internal working models, of their own worthiness based on other people's availability and their ability and willingness to provide care and protection' (Howe et al. 1999: 21, referring to Ainsworth et al. 1978).

Being able cognitively to model the main factors of one's environment adds to understanding and effectiveness, and gives choices. To achieve social competence children create an inner working model made up of three elements:

- the self;
- other people;
- the relationship between self and others.

Four models are generally recognised (Howe et al. 1999: 25). The first three were developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth and the fourth by Main. They show the meaning and organisation of the infant's goal of seeking parental protection under stress:

- 1) Self (loved, effective, autonomous and competent) + other people (available, cooperative and dependable) = *secure* attachment patterns.
- 2) Self (unloved but self-reliant) + other people (rejecting and intrusive) = *avoidant* attachment patterns.
- 3) Self (low value, ineffective and dependent) + other people (neglecting, insensitive, unpredictable and unreliable) = *ambivalent* attachment patterns.
- 4) Self (confused and bad) + other people (frightening and unavailable) = *disorganised* attachment patterns.

The good attachment figure, who is thought of by the child as accessible, trustworthy, and available and prepared to help when asked, is reframed into the child's internal working model, which helps her think of herself in a positive way, as worthy of love, help and trust; the model builds on the child's self-esteem and efficacy. However, the poor attachment figure who is unreliable, unwilling, unsupportive and perhaps frightened or frightening, has the the opposite effect on the child's inner working model and self-esteem; the child considers herself to be unworthy and expects to receive negative or no responses from others, an expectation that in turn may shape those responses. The forms that models take, Bowlby believed, are more strongly decided by a child's actual experiences throughout childhood than was previously believed.

So the beginnings of learning about the self and others come about from the young child's experiences of relationships, generally with the main carer who is also mostly the child's primary attachment figure. The child has expectations about how the self is perceived and understood, and the likely interest and responsiveness of others in times of distress and anxiety. To guide their behaviour in future relationships, children and older people bring forward and use their categorised mental representations (categorised as either negative or positive). So internal working models contain *expectations* and *beliefs* about:

- one's own and other people's behaviour;
- the lovability, worthiness and acceptability of the self; and
- the emotional availability and interest of others, and their ability to provide protection.

'Based on these expectations and understandings, children develop behavioural strategies to ensure that their various needs are optimally met given the characteristics of their care and their carers' (Howe et al. 1999: 22). To highlight this point Howe et al. quote Bowlby (1973: 203): 'The functions of these models is to simulate happenings in the real world, thereby enabling the individual to plan behaviour with all the advantages of insight and foresight.' The fundamental path for children's future development is laid by these internal working models.

'In addition the child now begins to rely more on mental representations of attachment than the actual presence of the attachment figure ... the goal-corrected partnership that emerges during the preschool years sets the stage for attachment across the life span. As the child grows towards adolescence and adulthood, internal working models of attachment are expected to reflect an increasing understanding of the parent's own motivations, feelings, plans and developmental goals resulting in a relationship of mutual trust and understanding' (George 1996, cited by Howe et al. 1999: 25).

However, these tracks of development can be modified positively or negatively by changes in the child's friends and family; and adjustments of people's responsiveness can strengthen or weaken the child's internal working models. So the internal thinking of the child is influenced by the quality of her external relationships. Howe et al. propose that this is in effect a definition of personality, and that this is why attachment theory is described as a theory of personality development. The theory explains how features of close relationships influence emotional experience, cognitive modelling, and relationship approaches.

After children have shaped their own behaviour and that of the attachment figure, then internal working models start to categorise expectations and beliefs about all other significant behaviour. Accordingly, rather than internal working models being organised by experience, experience is organised by them. So we behave, relate, feel and respond in a constant way and our personalities become consistent, persevering and predictable. We then begin to expect certain things of ourselves and others (Howe et al. 1999: 23). Thus an adopted child with a now positive IWM may be able to cope with and gain satisfaction from contact with her birth parents by seeing for herself her birth parents' frailties and so acquiring a better understanding of why they were unable to care for her appropriately.

In the context of post-adoption contact with birth relatives there is another salient factor to be considered. We must consider the adverse background of most children currently placed for adoption. This background creates an inner working model of their own unworthiness and the inappropriate behaviour and unreliability of the birth parents. The result is an insecure child with difficult behaviour, placed with adoptive parents whose good parenting, patience and interest may change the negative IWM for a positive one.

Bowlby was aware of the individual's lifelong search for meaning in what happens in and around each person, but postponed his study of this very significant subjective world until late in his life. But he prepared the way for the study of subjective experience by his development of the internal working model and by his consideration of how we process information that reaches our senses.

Heard and Lake (1997) developed a theoretical model which complements and extends attachment theory, advancing on Bowlby's internal working models and calling them internal models of the experience of relationships (IMERs). They use an evidence-based method of working, which can be extended and developed as new and authentic evidence emerges from reliable research. Their IMER allows for the fact that individuals have different experiences of the same person, who of course has different moods, so that different templates for the experience of that person are stored as predictors of and guides to their present and future behaviour.

Summary of Bowlby's attachment theory

Bowlby's lifelong work on attachment theory is important because it gives us a comprehensive understanding of the kind of parenting styles whose outcome is a secure, happy child, one who is confident and independent, yet can ask for support when needed and knows it is available. The primary attachment figure is one whose sensitive, responsive and encouraging parenting has given the child a secure base from which to explore and enjoy the world, and the child knows that the attachment figure will be accessible and responsive when needed. The good attachment will be one of the most important factors in helping the child to achieve her optimum emotional, practical and social development, with good self-esteem; it also helps with speech and physical growth.

Conversely, insecurely attached children are troubled and become troubled adults. They in turn are unable to form good attachments with their children, and this is perpetuated through generations. Bowlby in the 1970s was advocating that parents should be given help before and after their child was born, to help them become well-attached parents of well-attached children.

Bowlby was able to be flexible about his original thesis about an infant's and child's need for a constant, uninterrupted mother-attachment figure. He was criticised initially for oppressing women by deeming them to be attachment figures. Whilst insisting that for most children there was one 'strong' attachment figure, he began to include other attachment figures, both male and female, who could just as successfully be the child's secure base. He initially did not consider children from other cultures, who are raised by their extended families and have a number of attachment figures, or who are brought up in kibbutzim. It seemed that many of these children benefited from their variety of caregivers, whilst some children with different personalities might do better with one primary attachment figure.

Bowlby's contribution to our understanding of human relationships is immensely important. Attachment affects everyone, perhaps even from before we are born, until we die, and affects our partners, children, friends and relations through our affectional bonds. As Howe et al. (1999: 10) say, 'It is the theory which subsumes all others.' I shall use it to answer my questions about children's relationships with their parents and the effect of contact on their attachments and identity.

Separation and loss

Michael Rutter's work on separation and loss and their results in later life is important to Bowlby's view of attachment theory and links well with it. Separation and loss are clearly a feature in the lives of adopted children, and Rutter helps us make sense of them and their effects and how they can be minimised. His work gives me a better understanding of adopted children's many separations – from birth parents, siblings, foster carers and significant others.

Rutter wanted to know 'what is special about the separations which cause distress and disorder and what differentiates them from those which do not cause harm and which may indeed be happy and positive experiences' (Rutter 1977: 47). He found, from his own research and that of others, that the negative factors that may harm and distress children separated from their attachment figures include: residential care; impaired parental care; insecure bonds; and poor family relationships. Additional factors include multiple admissions to hospital, particularly if the first is before the child is five years old. Age is also an important factor, as infants between six and eight months show consistent fear of strangers, and although this diminishes from two or three years, children are still vulnerable to distress on separation until they are about four. Many of these factors may be results of insensitive, unresponsive and uninformed parenting, or an unfortunate combination of characteristics and circumstances. All these factors are salient in the context of adoption and contact.

On the other hand, Rutter identified many factors that helped separated children feel less distress and caused less harm to them. These factors included: experiences of planned, graded separations in happy circumstances; a small number of sensitive, responsive carers; maintaining of contact with familiar family members; and secure bonding by children, who, particularly if over four, tend to be less distressed on separation. Secure bonding makes children able to cope with strange situations and people, from the guarantee of their secure base and their own selfreliance. The sensitive, responsive caregiver was and probably is the one who will ensure that other helpful factors, such as contact and familiar toys and routines, are made available to the child. These findings are valuable to adoptive and birth parents and to my own analysis.

Rutter's conclusion in 1977 (p67) is that separation, loss and disturbed family relationships 'play an important part in the genesis of different kinds of child psychiatric disorder.' Later he considers that a continuing lack of a close

relationship makes children vulnerable to disorder if they then experience a stressful loss or separation, such as parental divorce (Rutter 1990, cited in Howe et al. 1999: 236). Though he had claimed at the beginning of the debate that Bowlby was unnecessarily pessimistic about this, Rutter remains broadly in accord with Bowlby's theory of attachment.

Defensive strategies

Children develop defensive strategies to help them cope with feelings of distress and anxiety, and Howe et al. (1999: 27-29) explain how these strategies are shaped. Children should be brought closer to their attachment figure simply by the design of the attachment system, no matter what the quality of the relationship, and then ideally are comforted and understood, which makes them feel secure. But in both secure and insecure attachment patterns children need to organise their actions and adapt to their particular kind of upbringing, in order to achieve closeness and feel secure. Howe and his colleagues examined the four basic attachment behaviours in terms of defensive strategies, and these are set out in Appendix 12.

Resilience

Attachment theory has made a significant contribution to the theory of resilience. This much newer concept has been the subject of an increasing literature since about 1985. Bowlby's secure base can be seen as an important component of resilience in children and young people. Gilligan's theory will help me to consider if and how resilience has been built and its connections with contact – how it may have been helped or hindered by contact, and whether contact has therefore been of benefit or detriment to attachment.

A resilient child is one who bounces back from adversity or who continues to function reasonably well in spite of it (Gilligan 1997). Resilience can be part of normal development under adverse circumstances, in place of the sense of powerlessness and helplessness that may otherwise arise from continuing stresses. Rutter (1985) identifies three characteristics that a person with resilience has: a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence; a sense of self-efficacy, that is, a belief in one's ability to make a difference; and a repertoire of skills for solving social problems. Gilligan points out that resilience may arise from a person's natural disposition or from social experience; it is the portion that arises from social experience that is open to influence. It may also be useful to think of resilience as operating in particular domains of functioning rather than universally.

Many different factors that make for resilience have been identified by research, and are conveniently summarised by Gilligan, who groups them under three headings. Some general attributes that contribute to resilience are higher social class, an easy temperament, the absence of organic deficits, and the lack of any early separation and loss. Some immediate circumstances that help a child to be resilient are competent parenting, a relationship with at least one primary caregiver, and some good and enduring friendships. The third group of factors that make for resilience are characteristics of psychological functioning, such as a high IQ, a good coping style, an internal locus of control, and good social skills.

Gilligan goes on to propose three main influences on resilience in children and young people, which he calls the building blocks of resilience. They are: the sense of a secure base; self-esteem; and the sense of self-efficacy. The feeling of having a secure base comes from having a secure family to return to, a supportive social network, good attachment relationships, and routine and structure in the child's life. Young people may spend much time away from their secure base, but are likely to return to it at times of particular difficulty, when they are ill, or distressed, or simply hard up! Looked-after children usually have no secure base in their family of origin, but still need (like other children) to feel cared about, to feel that they matter. In place of their own family they may have to make do with a wider social network.

Gilligan makes some recommendations to practitioners for encouraging resilience. His key messages for helping the development of a secure base are to promote contact with a child's family of origin and other figures from the past, and to encourage friendships with peers. Contact may enable children to feel cared about, to see some positive aspects of their heritage, and to build their own identity.

Identity

Definitions of identity

Identity is about what we feel about ourselves and how we believe others perceive us. A positive sense of identity is defined by Erikson, the founding father of identity theory, as 'a sense of psychological well-being, a feeling of being at home in one's body, of knowing where one is going, an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count' (Erikson 1968: 165). In relation to the identity formation of the adopted person, Triseliotis (2000: 89) writes, 'At its most basic, identity is about what we feel about ourselves and how we think other people see us. How individuals experience and explain themselves and how they are perceived by the wider society are abstract qualities and therefore difficult to define. The ultimate aim, though, of the processes [of identity formation] described so far is that their positive resolution will contribute to the formation of a strong identity with an increased sense of self-worth.' These definitions gave me a number of questions to include in the identity section of my semi-structured interview schedule.

Erikson's stages of development

The Freudian theory of development with Erikson's modifications provides for a succession of drive-control (inner and environmental) interactions. These can be fitted into a schema of polar attitudes that develop in progressive stages of a person's life, creating a conflict at each stage which should be resolved in order to avoid extremes of personality development. Erikson thus evolved his eight stages of development, which he described as: (1) infancy: trust versus mistrust; (2) early childhood: autonomy versus shame and doubt; (3) preschool: initiative versus guilt; (4) school age: industry versus inferiority; (5) puberty: identity versus identity confusion; (6) young adulthood: intimacy versus isolation; (7) middle adulthood: generativity versus stagnation; and (8) late adulthood: integrity versus despair. These eight stages give insight into the conflicts which may or may not be resolved by adopted children who have experienced earlier adversities.

Triseliotis' key factors

Triseliotis (2000) tells us that identity is formed from a whole complex of factors including experience of relationships. Three key factors, which particularly for adopted people influence personal and social identity, are identified as:

- feeling wanted within a secure environment as a result of a warm and caring relationship within the adoptive family;
- having knowledge of personal and family history;

- being perceived as a worthwhile person within the community (a factor which is likely to assume greater importance as children move through to adulthood and separate from their adoptive family, especially children from black minority groups placed transracially).

These key factors gave me a further basis for my identity questions and analysis.

Race and Identity

Identity formation for all adopted children means extra tasks for adopters. For black and mixed ethnicity children placed transracially there are even more hurdles to overcome. But the formation of their identity can be assisted in four ways (Prevatt Goldstein and Spencer 2000: 11):

- Carers can give positive messages about their identity all the time, including their ethnicity, culture, language and religion.
- Placements can be found which provide continuity with the children's previous experiences of these aspects of their identity.
- Positive role models can be found for these aspects of the children's identity.
- Experiences of continuity, and positive role models, should be available in the local neighbourhood and local schools and places of worship.

The most important thing in this context is to value the children's heritage, while not depreciating their other identities. Race and ethnicity are discussed in chapter 2.

Difference and identity

Ryburn (1992) identifies two messages about identity which adopted children may receive. First, there is the message about being different in social status, when a child of workingclass birth parents in an urban area, for instance, moves to middleclass adopters living in the country. Second, there may be differences in physical and personal qualities between the child and her adopters. If the child receives or perceives messages that these differences and qualities are not valued, then the effects on her selfconcept and selfesteem can be negative. Conversely, if the differences are valued and presented positively to the child she can feel good about herself.

Ryburn found that difference is important, and could contribute to an adopted child feeling that her adoptive parents were proud of a talent she had inherited from her birth parents and not from them, and that they valued this and other differences between them. This supports the similar findings of Triseliotis (1973) and Raynor (1980), and is a factor of which I was aware in my own practice from the late 1980s

until 2001. These findings are corroborated in recent studies by Thomas et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002) and Smith and Logan (2004).

Identity and attachment

Identity formation, like attachment, is fundamental to an infant's and child's development, well-being and future mental health. Triseliotis (2000: 92) informs us that studies of the identity formation of adopted people suggest that during early childhood the overriding developmental consideration that contributes to the core of identity formation is the quality of children's relationships with and attachments to their primary carer(s). This is particularly important for adoptive parents and children who have additional tasks to carry out in constructing the children's identity. Thus there is a strong link between attachment and identity. It would seem that they are unequivocally connected: without a secure attachment well-formed identity would be difficult to achieve.

Identity, attachment and resilience are closely connected, and each is dependent on aspects of the others. It is clear from the section on resilience above that the main influences on resilience in children and young people, what Gilligan calls the building blocks of resilience, are: the sense of a secure base; self-esteem; and a sense of self-efficacy.

Identity, attachment and contact

Triseliotis poses some salient questions for adoption and contact: How far can identities compensate for each other? For example, would a gap in genealogical or ethnic awareness be compensated for by other strengths such as high-quality relationships and a strong sense of belonging? And how far would high levels of self-esteem acquired as a result of the quality of experiences within the adoptive home be able to withstand consistently negative messages from outside? My study may give some answers.

A further example of the connection between attachment and identity and in this case contact comes from Thoburn et al. (2002: 103), who write that all studies of children who cannot be brought up by their natural parents strongly support the theory that two essential elements in enhancing their well-being are, first, belonging to a family to which the child feels fully attached (usually referred to as a sense of permanence), and second, a sense of continuity, best achieved by continued contact with important people from the past, especially members of the birth family. The first clearly refers to attachment and the second to identity formation.

Erikson (1963) saw human development as the interaction between genes and the environment in which the individual lives, and this is why his theories are important to adopted people and to this part of the study. Children who are raised in their original families have continuous sources around them of information and reinforcement of who they are and how they are. They can see whom they look like, from whom they inherited their blue eyes and red hair, their quiet thoughtful personality, their grandpa's unusual gait, or their love of music or sport or their talent at maths. So identity evolves and grows over the years and is somewhat taken for granted as parents, friends and relatives continually reinforce identity traits. However, these opportunities are unavailable for children unable to stay with their birth families. The children in my study will have been relinquished as babies or removed by order of the court and therefore not have had the opportunity to be raised by those whom they resemble in looks, personality, traits, skills, or talents such as musical, athletic and artistic ability. So I am keen to examine the sense of identity of the children in families who have some form of contact with the birth family and those with no contact. I shall compare the findings from the two groups and identify differences and similarities in the children's sense of identity.

Many children placed for adoption in recent years, including most of the children in this study, will have complex backgrounds in which they have experienced physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect and rejection. Considering these parts of their history it would seem that their self-esteem and identity will have been much affected. Fratter (1996: 136) in her study links the children's sad and abusive backgrounds with their identity-building needs, as outlined earlier in Triseliotis, and concludes that these children 'may be unable to feel loved and wanted, however much they are loved by their adoptive parents, if they have not been helped to make sense of the implicit or explicit rejection by their birth parents and succeeding carers and have experienced community stigma, for whatever reason. These two factors are independent of the attitudes and skills of the adoptive parents.' The children and their adopters also have to make new attachments within the adoptive family, achieve additional tasks to assist identity formation, and integrate these gains into their hopefully developing selfknowledge about being adopted, all crucial to identity formation.

In the context of adoption, identity and contact or no contact, the work of Triseliotis will assist my understanding of the children's identity formation. See the Findings chapter where I will use his key concepts of the extra tasks adopted children need to carry out for their identity formation.

Conclusion

The relevance of attachment and identity theory to adoption and contact

Attachment theory is pertinent to adoption because most children who are placed for adoption have insecure attachments, just as their parents before them may also have had poor attachments; so the pattern repeats itself. These children need to learn to trust again, from foster and adoptive families who can give them security and build their attachment. I have used attachment theory to look at the relationships in the families taking part in my study, and through my observations and analysis of the transcripts have found themes running through the data, and answers to the question how contact or its absence affects identity and attachment.

Attachment theory is crucial to adoption from the very beginning because, if we can understand the original relationships between the birth parents and the child, we can begin to understand how the child is currently behaving and relating to her foster carers. We may then be more able to give the new adoptive family full and accurate information about the child, her behaviour, and how it came about. And understanding the child's attachment style should enable a better match between the child and the new family. When the new family are better informed, matched and prepared, they are able to increase the child's resilience and build attachments.

The understanding of the secure base of attachment theory and knowledge of attachment patterns may inform us whether it is appropriate to promote contact with a child's family of origin and significant others from the past, or perhaps to develop a relationship not previously there, as it may become meaningful (Neil 2002).

Identity theory is essential to understanding the adopted child and her knowledge of her background, whether it has come from her adoptive or her birth parents, and to understanding how this information has influenced the children's identity formation in both groups with and without contact. As shown in chapter 2, contact is considered an advantage to the development of identity.

It could be hypothesised that contact may enable children to feel cared about, to see some positive aspects of their heritage and to build their own identity. Knowledge of identity theory, combined with an understanding of patterns of attachment, helps my analysis to be aware of problems and possible difficulties experienced by the parties to contact, and of whether or not short-term distress and uncomfortableness may be worth the longterm benefits of contact.

Attachment theory is all about relationships, how they become secure or insecure, their lifelong effects, and how they touch others throughout the lifespan. Contact too is fundamentally about the making, managing, sustaining and sometimes breaking of affectional links, and how each child and adult may affect the others in the context of adoption and contact. Identity and attachment are closely linked, and both depend on secure, communicative relationships between the adoptive parents and their children.

Chapter 5

Methodology

Purpose and general aim of the research

The purpose of the research is to examine closely the meaning of contact or of no contact in adoptive family life and relationships, how contact is perceived and considered by members of the family, and how in their view it has affected attachment relationships and the promotion of identity in their children. Children do not talk about attachment but rather about how they get on together and show that they care about each other, so these were the terms I used with them. Adoptive parents are more familiar with the term attachment, but I also used similar questions and terms with them as I did with the children. I will also examine the meaning of contact for the family at the time of the placement and currently, and what its effects in the future are thought by the adopters and children as likely to be. Identity was a more easily understood term, which they referred to as a sense of self.

I did not set out to test for causal links between contact, attachment and identity. However, I was aware that the data might suggest such connections and I needed to remain alert to this possibility. Indeed my analysis revealed one or two of what Bull and Shaw (1992) call 'causal accounts' in relation to attachment and contact, and I became interested in this connection, which will be explored further in this chapter and more fully in chapter 7. It was also explored in chapter 2, which showed that most studies found that attachment was not delayed or impeded by contact. But Ryburn (1992), Fratter (1996) and Sykes (2000) indicated a causal connection with contact. Quinton et al. (1998) advise caution in making claims to such 'findings'. However, there is a much more certain connection between identity and contact (see chapter 2), and here many 'causal accounts' were made.

The dimensions of identity were explored by my interview questions on selfknowledge, selfefficacy and selfesteem. The dimensions of attachment were explored in the interviews by questions on the quality of the children's attachment with their parents, siblings, peers, grandparents, neighbours and school friends, as perceived by the adoptive parents and the children themselves. My observations of

the children and parents and how they related to each other were used, as well as a relationship game and an identity game.

Specific aims

- To understand the significance and meaning of contact or of no contact for adoptive families, their attitudes to contact, and the value they place on it.
- To explore and analyse how contact is perceived by the adopters and the children, whether as a help or a hindrance to the children's attachment relationships, to the promotion of the children's identity, and to family life in general. For children with no contact, to explore in the same way how this is perceived, as a hindrance or a help, and what it means to them and their families.
- To review the literature so as to compare the findings of similar research with mine and to identify gaps in the research.

Methodological approach

I used a qualitative methodological approach because this best suits my focus, which is an indepth study of adoptive families' experiences. This approach enabled and allowed me to compile and concentrate on detailed and rich accounts from a small sample of children and their adoptive parents (Bryman 2001: 387). Although quantitative research allows researchers to gather information from a larger number and wider range of respondents, it is more limited in its depth and exploratory quality (McCracken 1988: 16). Clearly this does not suit my study of such a sensitive, complex field as this – adoptive relationships and the meaning of contact for the child and adoptive family, whose understanding, experiences and perceptions of contact I explored.

Indepth interviews, in their own homes, enabled the children and their adoptive parents to tell me their stories at length and in detail. I gained meaningful, sad, upsetting, happy, joyful and funny accounts from them, and was able to follow up ideas, feelings and nuances that emerged from the narrative. I was there to offer explanations of the research if and when necessary. Each interviewee was unique, each was easy and interesting to listen to, but there were also similarities between them. Each of them contributed to the essence of the study. I took heart from David

Silverman's encouragement: 'Many great researchers have used similar methods with few qualms, so draw from their strength' (Silverman 2005: 304). This assertion is supported by most of the researchers in my literature review, such as Quinton et al. (1998), Fratter (1996), Macaskill (2002), Thomas et al. (1999), and Tizard (1977). However, I have used some simple quantitative measures and charts to evaluate and compare the two groups. Qualitative research is somewhat familiar territory, as I used it on two small studies during my first degree and later in my MA dissertation (Dally 1988).

Another benefit of using qualitative methods is that they allowed me to explore matters in the adopters' and children's own familiar, natural surroundings, where they were more comfortable, less impressionable, more in control and more confident in their responses (Glasgow Centre for the Child & Society 2005: 12). There were also more opportunities in this setting for interaction and observation of nonverbal communication. It was possible also to observe the attachment relationships between family members, and the children's self-esteem and sense of identity. A further benefit was that it allowed me to use my imagination, to reflect on my practice, and to question dearly-held beliefs of my own and the adopters.

It is sometimes claimed that qualitative methodology is in contrast to natural scientific quantitative research. Qualitative research is concerned with examining our interpretations of the social world, so as to gain an understanding of that world (Bryman 2001: 264), rather than with numbers of things in it. Whilst considering qualitative methods and their attributes, particularly their evaluative qualities, Shaw (2003: 59) is even-handed about quantitative methods, explaining that 'there is an interesting history of idiographic and ipsative quantitative methods for individual case analysis in psychology by Rogers, Allport, Cattell and Kelly.' Shaw is not convinced that all forms of qualitative methods lend themselves equally or even directly to evaluative purposes. He cites Reid (1994: 477), who asserts that 'Neither method is superior to the other, but each provides the researcher with different tools of inquiry' that can be set against a single set of standards.

To ensure that my research is as scientific as possible I have tried to carry it out in a careful, conscientious, scrupulous, thorough, exact and precise manner, striving for validity and reliability, and using the guidance of those mentioned throughout this chapter. Furthermore, I endeavoured to implement well-thought-out methodology, so that appropriate information or data were collected from an appropriate sample with as little undue influence as possible. I tried to keep firmly in mind that my

sample was selfselected, and I address this in this chapter. I shall go on to describe my methods, process, and reflections fully in each section, to illustrate their reliability and to show that my conclusions are valid. The data were analysed in as thorough and appropriate a manner as possible, using largely the guidelines of McCracken (1988: 41) and Silverman (2005: 149), and in consultation with others including my supervisor, Margaret Bell, colleagues and other researchers. However, despite these best-laid plans and without the benefit of hindsight, I did experience some setbacks and vulnerabilities, which will be described below, in the sections in which they occurred, and outlined in the conclusions.

Access

I wrote to the adoption team manager in the city selected about carrying out the research (Appendix 1), and she gained permission from the director of social services. Next I met the adoption team, showed them an outline of my proposed research, my aims, and examples of questions I would ask the children and their adoptive parents. The team was enthusiastic about the research, and I took account of their concerns about confidentiality and sensitivity regarding the questions I would ask. My draft introductory letter to the adopters (Appendix 2) and the one to the children (Appendix 8) also reassured them. I made presentations of my progress once or twice a year to the team and benefited from their feedback.

My former team and families

The local authority adoption agency from which my sample was identified is the authority for which I worked in child care and as an adoption worker for nearly twenty years. Having easy access to the adoption team leader was of immense help to me, as I was wellknown in the authority and familiar with many of its members and its processes. So I avoided the problems with gatekeeping that many of my fellow research students were experiencing. These time-consuming and frustrating problems were and still are experienced by many researchers, including Tizard (1977), Fratter (1996), Macaskill (2002), and Rushton et al. (2001). I was also aware that my former agency has a very large number of adoptive families from which I hoped to select a sample.

One of the possible drawbacks I was aware of was my previous relationships with the many families with whom I had worked to varying degrees over the years. McCracken (1988: 37) suggests that respondents in one's study should be perfect

strangers. Although I did aim for this, the response rate was low, and I had to work with what I could get; as McCracken says later, this is sometimes the reality. I had been aware that the response rate would be low because I wanted to interview the children, and considering people's privacy and protectiveness towards their children, a low response was unsurprising.

I had carried out varied amounts and forms of work with families, when employed by the agency. Clearly, unless I excluded a large number of adopters, I would have had some previous, though varying, contact with some adopters in my sample. On consideration it was decided to contact all adopters. Excluding those with whom I had worked in some way, would make it difficult to work out sensible criteria because of previous contact with so many people. The adoption team had ten workers, so I hoped that many of their families would respond and few of mine. In the event I used three families with whom I had worked.

A salient drawback to be considered was the attitudes of the adopters towards me in my new role. So, near the beginning of the interview, I addressed this issue, particularly in the three families with whom I had worked, saying that I needed their honest opinions and that I was now in the role of a researcher, and not an adoption social worker, a role from which I was now quite divorced. After the granting of the adoption order, when they were feeling secure as a family, I had used the above strategy to ask them to reflect on their experience of the process with myself and on the preparation groups, introductions, and so on. I said at that time that their honest answers about our unhelpful practice would assist in the future in improving the service for others, including themselves if they returned as second-time adopters. Their feedback was often most informative and they did in the main give some very forthright responses.

When I considered the drawbacks of working at 'home' and being a properly reflexive researcher, I was greatly reassured by the work and words of Sue White (2001). Saying '... doing ethnography at 'home' ... can help us examine, more self-consciously and analytically, what we are thinking about and doing in our professional practice ... However, I shall argue that we can only make these judgements once we have developed a particular kind of 'reflexivity' about our routines and practices' (White 2001: 101). To assist in differentiating between the more familiar concept of reflection and reflexivity she cites Woolgar (1988), who defines the former as 'benign introspection'; White expands this as 'a process of looking *inward*, and thinking about how our own life experiences or significant

events may have impacted upon our thinking, or on the research or assessment process.' Jan Fook (2001: 127) sees reflexivity 'as the ability to recognize the influence of the researcher's whole self and context (social, cultural and structural) on every aspect of the research, and the ability to use this awareness in the research act itself.'

Reflective confessional diaries are recommended by White (2001: 101-2); I found such a diary invaluable in promoting debate with myself and other researchers, and in identifying matters such as attempts to empower the children or their parents, sometimes successful and sometimes detrimental. In this way I continually learned and tried to improve my research skills. As a former social worker I was used to accounting for my actions and justifying them to the families I worked with, in court, at the adoption panel and to my supervisor. This type of thinking and self-examination nurtures reflexivity. I shall discuss and give further examples of reflexive practice in the analysis.

I took the above into account in my analysis and carefully examined the transcripts for elements of reserve and hesitation, particularly in those adopters with whom I had previously worked. Two couples initially were somewhat reserved and not entirely comfortable. I had a sense with one of them, whose younger, un-interviewed child was behaving badly and had attachment difficulties, that they were slightly defensive in response to some of the questions. However, once they realised this was not my focus, they relaxed and were more at ease. They talked about their concerns with Olivia and how the foster carer had warned them that she was 'different' and not an easy child like her older brother.

During my visits this family felt that they should face up to an issue which they had been avoiding and which my interviews had brought into prominence. They decided to seek professional help for Olivia before she started school. On reflection I thought that my involvement had illuminated the difficulties they were experiencing with their daughter, as their older, interviewed child was so different in his behaviour and emotions. Although it was not my role to offer advice and help, it was always a possibility, as happened in this case, that my questions might trigger off underlying issues. Therefore, as I did with all of the other families, at the beginning of the interview I gave the family a leaflet for the local Post-Adoption Centre, and also the name of the postadoption worker at the adoption agency.

I considered the ethos of the team in the matter of their relationship with the families with whom we worked, which was, that we worked with them in a professional and friendly way but were not their friends. Some families had wanted to be our friends, but our ethos was put forward during the preparation groups and in the home study visits. Having to work with people through many painful and personal issues, and maybe enabling them to see that perhaps adoption was not after all for them, made it seem wisest to remain professional but to carry out the work in a friendly way.

First contacts

The administrative staff of my former adoption team sent out 156 letters of information about the research (Appendix 2), to all adopters with children in placement for over a year and legally adopted. No selection of families was carried out by either the team or myself at this stage, except for the exclusion of families in the early stages of placement. A consent slip was attached to the letter, with a stamped addressed envelope for its return to me if they wished to take part or find out more about the research at this stage or both. Seventeen families responded positively; two other families said they would like to take part, but in one family their daughter did not wish to do so, and the other did not wish their son to take part. I telephoned both families, explaining my need to interview children, and followed this up with a thankyou letter.

Making contact through the adoption agency preserved the respondents' confidentiality, making it easier for them to consult the adoption team with any queries or to opt out. The majority of the respondents had contact, and I remained short of four no-contact families. Immense efforts were made by myself and the adoption team, including a letter (Appendix 3) to former team members who tried to remember no-contact families from the past, and eventually we did get three more families, but despite further efforts a tenth family for the no-contact group could not be found. From the extra families with contact I winnowed out those with whom I had previously worked. I telephoned these families and thanked them for their willingness, but explained that I had selected mainly families with whom I did not have a lengthy working relationship; a thankyou letter followed (Appendix 4).

Building a sense of trust and comfortableness with the adoptive parents and their children, was crucial to my research. I wanted to take care to handle and organise matters in the best possible way for them. So my first letter gave them written information about myself, the research, and the kind of questions I would be asking

them and their children. I was honest about these, and stated also that I needed their help, as they are the people who have experience of the meaning of contact for them and their children, so that it would be only with their knowledge and help that I could carry out the research. I also suggested they could meet me at the adoption summer party, giving them and the children an opportunity to 'look me over', and to ask me questions and discuss any concerns. These opportunities, I hoped, would reassure and inform their decision whether to take part or not.

Parties are organised by the adoption team twice a year and all adoptive families who have children placed with them are invited. In this way parents can maintain links with their worker, make new links with other adopters and their children, thus enlarging their support networks. Children meet other adoptive children, which allows them to see that being adopted is not so unusual.

I was concerned to show the study to be interesting, useful and enjoyable for them. However, whilst wishing to be forthright and honest with the adopters, I did not mention interviewing the children at the beginning of the letter, as I was keeping in mind the understandable protectiveness that adopters have for their children. I went on to reassure them that I would keep everyone's names and details confidential. I would be interviewing only families and not any social workers. This showed them that I was mainly interested in their views and those of their children, it was also a reassurance of the confidentiality of what they told me, and that they were free to talk about matters like preparation and support without feeling disloyal to their worker or agency and without wondering if I would be making comparisons and taking sides.

In the penultimate paragraph of the letter I reiterated that I needed them to help me carry out the research. I then outlined the probable length of the interviews, and at this point said that I would like to interview the children, with their permission. I gave samples of the kind of questions I would ask the children and said that I would use prompts and drawings to help the children understand and answer the questions. In the final paragraph I said I needed their informed consent, and that I would be writing the research up as a doctoral thesis, but would preserve their anonymity.

I had considered interviewing the adoptive parents first, and then later, when we had formed a relationship, asking about involving the children. Macaskill (2002) found that this worked well in gaining her sample. However, Thomas et al. (1999) found that, although 48 families who took part in previous research of theirs agreed to

being contacted later for their children to be interviewed, in the end only 20 actually consented to their children taking part in the research. Quinton et al. (1998) had a similar experience. So I decided to identify from the start a sample of adopters who felt their children could be interviewed. It also seemed to me more straightforward and honest, as well as taking into account time and resource restraints.

A year or two after the adoption order has been made, when the families have settled, become secure and found their own identity as an adoptive family, that's the time when adoptive parents are often most enthusiastic to talk about their experiences (Smith and Logan 2004, Macaskill 2002). They can be more open then over their feelings about adoption and everything to do with it – the good and the bad; their concerns and fears over: the intrusiveness and frustrations of assessment; waiting for a placement, and of living with and in many cases learning to love the children; the immense sense of joy and the worries that the children bring; and in some cases the feelings of being rejected, becoming despairing, and disliking and rejecting the children. The profound joy and anxieties of the whole business, and perhaps particularly contact, can sometimes become overwhelming and need to be talked about. On the other hand, I was well aware that many families wish to be freed from visiting social workers and want to consolidate their family identity. For some this remains the case even after a considerable time, and they may not be so keen to take part in research such as mine, particularly as I wanted to interview their children. At any rate, at that stage, I felt confident of getting a good response and that adopters would be interested in my study, as adoptive parents like others are delighted to talk about their children.

Nevertheless, when it comes to their children, adoptive parents are probably even more protective than the parents of homegrown children. Adoptive children generally have a sad, harmful and complex past which can leave them with many difficulties in coping with and making new relationships and learning to love and trust their new family. So when the children are settled and making good progress, naturally the adopters do not want to take any risks. After all, this stranger, talking to their child about personal family matters and asking possibly emotive questions, about relationships, contact and so forth could upset their child. On the other hand, when children are unsettled and having difficulties, that is clearly not an appropriate time for more complications in their lives.

I attended the adoption summer party and was introduced to some of the families who were interested in taking part in my study by their social workers. The workers

told me that these particular adopters were coping exceptionally well with contact; they were open, confident and capable parents and the children had become secure and happy, so the workers believed they were ideal families for me. However, many of these families did not want their children to be involved, much to the social workers' surprise, but not entirely to mine, considering how protective parents are concerning their children. I wondered if some of these families were not quite confident enough as parents just yet to allow a researcher into their lives, and not quite confident enough about their growing sense of identity as a family. These families were quite newly formed. Perhaps, as things were going well, they simply did not wish to tempt fate.

After the return of the the slip indicating the adopters' interest in the research and their consent to being contacted directly by me, I sent out letters thanking them for their time and interest in my research. Each letter was personalised from what I already knew about them, for instance how many children they had. (This information was supplied by the adoption team.) I also told them when I would next be in touch, and that I would send a small simple questionnaire to find out more about them and their children before I began interviewing. I was keen they should be aware of my interest and that I needed their help. So it was important to be courteous and professional, to show my continuing interest, keep them involved, engaged and informed about what I needed and the next stage.

Sample

My sample was a purposive one of nineteen adoptive families, of which ten had contact and nine did not. The families with contact had in all twenty adopted children, of whom thirteen were comprehensively interviewed. The families without contact had in total sixteen adopted children, of whom twelve were comprehensively interviewed. Four were not interviewed: one girl was having therapy and it was not appropriate to interview her; the other three were too young, but wanted to be involved and so took part in the Four Field Map (Sturgess et al. 2001), which I have called the relationship game, described later. This was also the case for the seven younger siblings in the families with contact. The no-contact families had four teenage birth children, and three were interviewed as they too wanted to be involved.

The number of families was large enough to allow me to divide them into two groups, those who have contact and those who do not. These groups were big

enough for me to make some meaningful comparisons between the two and to draw out links and themes in my analysis. The sample was of a manageable size for a one-person study and allowed me the scope to explore with the families a wide range of perceptions of contact.

The sample may be biased because it was self-selected. There may be the danger that only happy families wished to take part. However, the research findings of Tizard (1977), Fratter (1991 and 1996), Triseliotis et al. (1997 and 2005), Triseliotis (2000), Neil (2002), and Smith and Logan (2004) found that the majority of adoptive parents were satisfied and happy with their family life. Their families too may have been self-selected. Adoptive families often wish to 'repay' their gift of a family by giving something back, and taking part in research such as mine is one way of doing so. Another reason may be that many adoptive parents love to talk about their children and the whole experience of adoption.

The study involved 44 interviews – these included the 19 adoptive families, and 25 children, as some families had two or three adopted children. Some additional interviews in the form of the relationship game were carried out with the younger siblings who wished to be involved but were too young to be properly interviewed. I also carried out telephone interviews with five adoption team managers in the north of England, to find out about the implementation and progress of the new adoption regulations and standards. The aim of the Adoption and Children Act (2002) is the paramouncy of children's needs: maximising the contribution that adoption can make to providing a lifelong, stable, safe, good-quality family life for children who cannot live with their birth families. It also legislates for pre- and post-adoption support for adoptive and birth families. It is discussed more fully in chapter 8.

I chose a purposive sample of adoptive parents and their children, who were aged between six and 18 years. Thirteen of the children had contact and 12 had none, giving me families with the features I wished to examine. Silverman (2005: 129) cites Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 370): 'Many qualitative researchers employ ... purposive, and not random, sampling methods. They seek out groups, settings and individuals where ... the processes being studied are most likely to occur.' The groups were a mix of boys and girls, who had been in placement for at least a year, mainly in middleclass white adoptive families. All the families were English, except for one Scottish family, and one couple in which the wife was Irish, as were their two adopted children. The remainder of the children were also of white and English ethnicity. There were no black children or children of mixed heritage in the sample

because children of colour had been placed with appropriately matched families outside the county.

I intended, perhaps because this was always a strong possibility, to include a wide age-range of children, to enable me to explore the perspectives and progress of, and the issues of contact for, children at different ages, taking into account Brodzinsky's levels of understanding (Brodzinsky 1984). For example, Brodzinsky found that young children under four years of age have no intellectual understanding of adoption, but can learn vocabulary about it. By six to eight years of age children begin to understand clearly that adoption and birth are two different ways of entering a family. They also at this stage need simple and factual information about relationships and their permanence and about motives for adoption and relinquishment – all very pertinent to my study. As it happened, my response was from families whose children had a wide age-range, between six and 18 years.

Initially I was keen to interview children of three and four years, but on reflection and in the light of Brodzinsky's work, I realised that these young children's cognition was probably not mature enough. Yet their very naivety, I thought, would have been interesting to explore, in order to find out just how these young children perceive contact in the context of adoptive family life, what it means to them, what has become ordinary for them, and what seems hard or complex to them. I did attempt to interview (by default) one girl who was nearly four, but she was more interested in showing me her toys and the seedlings she was growing. It was virtually impossible to keep her on track of even simple questions. A further issue with young children would have been an ethical one, in view of their limited understanding of informed consent, confidentiality and the complex interview questions.

The city from which my sample was drawn is in the north-east of England. The 19 adoptive families were made up mainly of married heterosexual couples, with three partner-free female adopters (all in the contact group). Most adoptive families tend to be white and middleclass (Triseliotis et al. 1997). This national trend is reflected in my sample, but the ethnicity here is more white than elsewhere; the national census of 2001 shows that, although the city has a population of almost a quarter of a million, only a tiny 3.3% of its people are from ethnic minorities.

Ethics of interviewing children

Interviewing children raises ethical questions about the children's rights and their understanding of participation in interviews for research such as mine. Should we be interviewing children at all, and if so at what ages and in what venue, and should a trusted adult be present (as this may raise issues of power and control)? However, my literature review shows, from the findings of Fratter (1996), Thomas et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002), Neil (2004) and Smith and Logan (2004), that children were keen and able to talk to these authors. The researchers found that generally the children enjoyed doing so, as in the past they had felt they had not been consulted or listened to about their wishes and feelings or about other matters important to them. It was also the case in my study that the children were keen and able to take part. I used the principles of the Glasgow Centre for the Child & Society (2005), which are designed, the centre tells us, to promote an ethical approach to research and the attainment of universally accepted standards, and to provide a framework for encouraging critical, reflexive thinking when researchers are contemplating and conducting their research.

Further issues concerning the interviewing of children are those of access, power, informed consent, and finding the best way to carry research out so that the children are empowered, understand the research aims and are at ease with the process. I assured and reassured them verbally and in writing that their confidentiality will be protected, that they could stop the tape at any time and that they did not need to answer every question. I shall address these issues more fully in the interview section.

The postal questionnaire

To allow me to use the interview time to best advantage for more complex matters, and also to enable me to select my purposive sample (Silverman 2005: 129), I developed a short draft questionnaire (Appendix 6) asking for simple data such as the name, age and dates of birth of the child(ren), and the date of placement with them and with foster carers. Contact questions asked: if they had any, with whom, its frequency, and whether it was face-to-face or indirect. I was also aware from McCracken (1988: 35) and Silverman (2000), that I could save time by not having to search the transcripts for basic information.

Before developing the postal questionnaire I considered using it as an opportunity to gain much more information, but its length, and the time it would take busy adopters to complete, deterred me, as did my supervisor. I decided to keep it to one side of A4 paper. So this brief questionnaire would encourage rather than discourage the adopters, and hopefully it would keep them interested and aware of my interest in them. This one sheet of paper also had to have a large, clear, informative and user-friendly heading, namely 'You and Your Children', and had to explain the purpose of the questionnaire.

I consulted my supervisor Margaret Bell and other experienced researchers, including Catherine Macaskill, Beth Neil and Julie Young, who confirmed some of my thoughts on the length and depth of the postal questionnaire. I also considered carefully how to make the questions clear, unambiguous, sensitive and non-threatening. I began by asking about the children, their names and ages and when they were placed, and then moved into the area of contact, defining direct and indirect, and asked them to circle the type of contact they had, its frequency, with whom, and so on. I used the principles for the order of questions that are suggested by De Vaus (1990) for achieving a good logical flow, and considered the following points: beginning with a question the adopters will enjoy answering, going on to factual easily answered ones, then advancing to the more difficult ones. Questions were grouped into sections and I made use of filter questions to ensure that the adoptive parents understood them. However, as shown below, adopters had quite different perceptions and classifications of contact from mine. They classified it by its closeness or by the way they felt about it, such as its comfortableness or its troublesomeness. This became clearer in the interviews. It raises the question of our professional classification of contact not being in tune with that of adopters.

One questionnaire for each adopted child was sent out and another consent slip, and an SAE in which to return these. To try to cover any other possibilities of misunderstanding, I advised the adopters in the covering letter to give approximate dates or answers where necessary. They could contact me by telephone and email at home and at the university with any concerns or questions. In response I sent them a thankyou letter in which I told the adopters when I would next write to them with an introductory letter for the children, and a copy for them.

Despite my efforts at clarity, two families gave the wrong year of birth for their child, and in one case I only found this out at our initial appointment but decided to try to interview the young child. Families sometimes misunderstood the contact

questions, then realised what they had been asked for and corrected their answers. One family had not yet legally adopted their child; this too I only discovered during the interview. When I compose another such questionnaire I will need to make it much clearer. One problem seemed to be lack of space between questions; I had sacrificed clarity for conciseness. The other main problem, discussed above, was my dichotomous professional categorisation of contact, of which they had quite different classifications.

The introductory letter to the children

Next I sent a short introductory letter to the children with a photograph of me on it (Appendix 8). It also gave examples of the questions I would ask them, and questions they might want to ask me (such as, Do I need to answer all the questions?), and my answers to these in turn. The letter told the children that they could pause, have a break, or stop the interview at any time. A consent note for the children was also enclosed. I would have liked to develop an audiotape for the children, as Thomas et al. (1999) did in their study, but resource constraints did not allow this. Copies of the material for the children were enclosed in a large envelope addressed to the adopters for their perusal before they handed over the enclosed envelopes to the children. Later, parents told me that their children were delighted to have a letter in an envelope addressed to them – something which does not happen in the era of the mobile telephone and email.

Being aware that it is imperative that children are given appropriate, simple, child-centred explanations about the research aims and are helped to understand what it is about, and that any questions that they have are answered, I did my utmost to address these matters. I explained to the children in this letter what the study was about, how they would be portrayed in the research material, and also that their names and where they live would be changed, as well as any other identifying material, and I explained more about the questions I would ask them, as well as asking them if they had any questions for me. The photograph of me on the introductory letter was intended to familiarise the children with me even a little, as otherwise I was a total stranger to most of them. I suggested they could consult with their parents, a trusted adult, or myself, if they wanted to ask about the questions, the consent or any other matters.

Telephone contact to arrange the interviews

I telephoned the adoptive parents to arrange to meet them in their homes at a time convenient for them. Mainly this was in the evenings, occasionally on Saturday mornings, and sometimes early morning or late afternoon if the parents were able to start work late or finish early. I suggested it would be a good opportunity to meet the children before, after or during the parents' interviews to familiarise them with me, and allow them to ask me any questions they might have. This happened in all cases. I also checked with the parents if they had any questions or concerns; they too had my email address and telephone number.

The semi-structured interview schedule: structure and rationale

The semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 7) was developed after consultations with my supervisor and other researchers who have interviewed children, including Julie Young, Beth Neil and Catherine Macaskill. I also took account of relevant literature by De Vaus (1990) on the sensitivity of questions and their logical order. When considering attachment relationships I reflected on my attachment chapter and reframed some of the material of Fahlberg (1988: 32-33) and Rutter (1977: 12) for the attachment questions and observation checklist. Triseliotis et al. (1997: ch.4, and 2000) and Erikson (1963: 247) were my main inspiration for my questions on identity, in particular their three key factors in identity; Howe and Feast (2000) were also most helpful. These are discussed later.

The overall purpose of the interview schedule was to elicit information about attachment relationships, identity, contact, and the meaning, value and significance of contact for the children and their parents, in the context of family life and relationships. Three sections were developed, on attachment, identity and contact, to elicit information on these central issues. It contained separate questions for the adopters, the children, and adolescent children. The child and adult questions complemented and confirmed each other. The questions were identical for families with and without contact, except that inappropriate contact questions were not asked, of the group without contact.

I aimed to make the questions for the children child-friendly, and gradually to ask about and explore what may be for some children more difficult matters. The other tools I considered using with the children included: lifestory books, if available and with the children's consent; family trees; prompt cards; an adjectives game relating

to contact; the job description game; the relationship game; and a cloud and sunshine 'game' that explores happy and sad or angry feelings and a one-page identity game, Who Do You ...? (Appendix 10). Games actually used are described later.

I began the interview schedule with some attachment questions that are enjoyable and easy for the adopters and their children to answer. For example, parents were asked, How was she when she first came to you? How is she settled now? Then I progressed to questions such as, How are you all getting on together? The children's questions corresponded to those for the parents, for example, Can you remember what it was like when you first came to live with your mum and dad? If they were adopted as babies I asked, What is your first memory?, then, How are you all getting on together? Both the adopters and the children were asked whom the children were attached to before they joined their family, and whether this attachment continued. I was looking for the link, if any, between their attachment and contact.

Identity questions to the adopters began with, How would you describe her personality, what kind of character is she? Correspondingly, the children were asked how they thought their parents had responded to this question, and did they agree and want to add anything. Then the interview schedule moved on to: What does your child know and understand about her background? And in the same way for the children: What do you know and understand about your background? Why was your birth mother unable to care for you? As in the attachment section of the interview schedule, I inserted prompts for myself and filters to appropriate questions, to enable the parents and their children to make connections between contact and identity formation (that is, their selfknowledge, selfesteem and selfefficacy).

Contact questions were asked last, when the parents and children had warmed up and were at ease with talking. Their aim was to elicit the meaning, value and significance that contact had in family life and relationships, and how it might link with identity and attachment. I had considered the questions carefully, and consulted my supervisor, the literature and other experienced researchers on how to make the questions clear, unambiguous, sensitive and non-threatening, but at the same time effective in eliciting their stories from the children and their parents. Some sample questions were: What does contact mean to you, what is its value and significance? What does it mean to your child? Why do you think you do it? Has it brought you closer? Children were usually interviewed a few days after their

parents; this gave them a chance to meet me in advance of their interviews, and to clarify with me any worries about the sample questions in the letter sent to them, or indeed any concerns about the interview.

The interview schedule was refined and worked on with the support of my supervisor. Prompts were carefully worked out and placed accordingly. Clearly the questions had to cover all the ground in the same order for everyone, giving them scope to tell their story, but with order and structure, avoiding the chaos of too much unrelated free speech, whilst preserving exploratory, loose responses. In this way '... the questionnaire protects the larger structure and objectives of the interview so that the interviewer can attend to the immediate task in hand' (McCracken 1988: 25).

Before carrying out the interviews I tested the interview schedule on members of my family and as a consequence changed some of the questions to make them clearer and more user-friendly, and this was an ongoing process. For example, I changed 'adoptive parents' to 'mum' and 'dad'. To the question, 'What do you understand about your past?', I added, 'Do you know and understand why your birth mother was unable to look after you?' However, beforehand, I checked out with the adopters if they were comfortable with me asking this and other difficult questions. McCracken (1988: 24) says about the semi-structured interview schedule that '... for the purposes of the long qualitative interview, it is indispensable.' This was certainly the case in my study. Well-thought-out questions and links between the three sections were imperative to elicit the information on the vital elements of the study and on other salient themes which emerged. The design enabled the children and their parents to tell their story logically, allowing both them and me to get the most out of the interviews.

The interviews

Interviews with the adoptive parents and the children were planned to begin late in 2003 or early in 2004. It would have been useful to use the children's Christmas holidays for interviews, but on reflection, since this is a busy and emotional time, I left them until January 2004. I met them in their own homes, as they were likely to be more comfortable and less open to influence there than if we had used an unfamiliar venue. I chose a time suitable for them and the children, avoiding inappropriate times such as when they were tired or more interested in a regular leisure pursuit, and I confirmed this with both children and adopters.

The advice of McCracken (1988) and Silverman (2005), and that of colleagues, was invaluable on buying the best tape recorder and separate microphone that I could afford. To avoid a backlog of tapes, they were sent off to be transcribed in batches of one or two families together. Immediately after the interviews, if possible, and using my framework of attachment theory, I recorded memoranda, observations on interactions, nonverbal communication, any interruptions, thoughts and so on, to help with the analysis, in my grey book which travelled about with me. It was a kind of 'confessional diary' as Sue White calls it (2001: 102). I learned from these notes in an ongoing way. They made me aware of my mistakes and of ways to improve my interviewing skills, particularly with the children, so that the study felt more robust for this attention and ongoing revision.

I was interviewing adoptive parents for their perceptions of the meaning of contact and how it is experienced in everyday life, and to explore their views on the attachment relationship and identity formation of their children and how these might link with and be affected by contact. Whilst some of the questions were easy, others were hard, needing thought and leading to complex answers. As McCracken (1988: 17) says of the long interview, '...the broader, more flexible net provided by qualitative techniques is appropriate.' Ian Shaw expands on this, saying that qualitative research 'is able to depict system workings, contextual factors and elusive phenomena, and provide thorough description ... Qualitative research draws attention to features of a situation that others may have missed but which once seen have major implications for practice' (Shaw 2003: 62).

I interviewed the children for their perceptions of similar matters to those I had discussed with their adoptive parents. I used the opportunity that interviewing gives to explore with the children any other relevant factors that they raised. Obviously the children have a main role in the family and it was crucial to me that their voices should be heard directly, not just secondhand from their parents, as so often happens in research and in children's lives in general (Thomas et al. 1999, Macaskill 2002, Smith and Logan 2004).

To promote a sense of comfortableness and familiarity I allowed time for a warm-up chat with both the adopters and the children before we began the interviews proper. Since I have a Scottish accent it was particularly necessary to familiarise the children with it.

After the warm-up I addressed the area of possible bias with adopters with whom I had had a previous relationship. I reassured them that I was now in the role of researcher; my time as a social worker was in the past. Now I needed and wanted their honest views of contact and of the factors that helped or hindered them, and this included my own involvement in the past, good or bad. I reminded them of the issue of confidentiality, but also that my thesis will be in the library and available on request. However, confidentiality could not be maintained should the child make any disclosure of past or present harm to me; I must report this to the agency. In addition, I reassured them that should issues arise after my interviews, support would be available from their adoption agency, which was aware that this might be necessary. Likewise their local After Adoption were aware of my study, had sent me leaflets to leave with them, and would give support should they need it.

Having gained simple data from my earlier postal questionnaire I was able to concentrate on the richer material during the interviews. Taking note of McCracken (1988: 12), I strove during the interviews to be friendly yet professional towards the adopters and children and to avoid inappropriate chitchat. I took advantage of opportunities for insight into the adopters' and children's feelings and experiences of contact, yet was mindful of the dangers of the familiarity of this wellknown subject (adoption in the familiar context of family life) for them and for me. Whilst being aware of the non-directive and unobtrusive approach, and using my social work skills, I avoided, occasionally with difficulty, a counselling mode, and the temptation to prompt with a suggestion, or to remark, You sound sad, angry, frustrated, delighted (McCracken 1988: 21). Instead I would try to enable the adopters and children more appropriately by repeating the question, and listening patiently and giving looks of interest and encouragement.

On one occasion the girl I was interviewing seemed to be straying off the subject and I steered her back on. However, luckily she ignored me and continued with what turned out to be salient material about her birth mother, and something she wanted to explore. But because it was difficult she introduced it with a trip to the shops. I could have been just a little more patient. I fell into a counselling mode with one of the fathers, saying he sounded angry; he instantly corrected me, saying he was concerned for his children in contact with the birth mother, who could be inappropriately emotional in her letters.

I began with easy open-ended questions, opening a purposeful conversation between us, and then moved on to the harder questions. All but two of the

adopters, like their children (except one), were open, articulate, forthright, thoughtful, and comfortable in talking with me about their family life, their relationships with their children, and so on. They had so much to tell me – the joys and sorrows when the children were first placed, how they are now, and what they themselves really felt about contact. In the main they were reasonably easy to keep on the track of the interview schedule, although one family in particular was immensely voluble; their compacted transcript is 69 pages long.

Making links between identity formation and contact was not explicitly easy for the adopters. Implicitly it was there and they could manage it with prompting. Making a link with attachment was much more difficult, and it seemed to me that they found it difficult to admit that their attachment might somehow depend on this connection with contact. The case was similar with the children, but more so. This is further explored below.

The children's interviews

I have at length and in depth considered, discussed, and consulted and read about the best ways to interview children. There is agreement among researchers, including Thomas et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002), Smith and Logan (2004) – and the children they interviewed indicated as much – that the best approaches include: clarity, gentleness, kindness, patience, steering, and being a good listener. I am told I have some of these attributes, but I continued to work on being simple and clear with my questions; my tendency to be forthright did gain the children's trust.

The interviews with the children were carried out a few days or up to a week or two after the interviews with their parents. This gave them an opportunity to see me when I first met their parents, and allowed them to look in advance at the audiocassette recorder and the separate microphone, and I reminded them that they would be able to pause or stop at any time during the interview. Either here or before their own interviews I did a little demonstration of recording, and the children followed this by recording their name and the date, to familiarise themselves with the recorder, which turned out not to be as obtrusive as I had imagined.

Interviewing the parents first had enabled me to find a good time to meet the children – clearly not when they are tired or their favourite television programme is on. Sitting around the kitchen table to carry out the interviews was often a comfortable arrangement for the children.

Ideally I wanted to interview the children individually without their parents present, as clearly a parental presence might have inhibited them and influenced their responses, and parents often feel they have to 'help out' their children. However, if they needed a parent's or sibling's presence, this would be fine. Only one girl needed her mother's presence, and she was the child with the shortest placement. At times she was comfortable to talk with me whilst her mother was in the next room. I took this into account in my analysis.

The children, like their parents, were open and communicative during the interviews. Thomas et al. (1999) and Macaskill (2002) also found this to be the case. I had been much daunted by the thought of interviewing the children, as I had been out of practice for over two years. I felt strongly that the children should have a voice, but knew that this opportunity of interviewing would never come again. I was aware that if I did not capture the moment it would be lost forever, and mistakes might be impossible to rectify. These fears were confirmed by McCracken (1988: 38). However, the children generally were interesting, straightforward, and a delight to interview. Their parents were apprehensive, but after the interviews the children said they had enjoyed the experience. In a followup telephone conversation with the adoptive parents this was further confirmed. A boy who had attachment difficulties when first placed, had continued to be anxious when on holiday. This year the holiday was shortly after my interview with him, and it seemed he had managed to overcome his anxieties. His mother was convinced that the interview had further relaxed him and freed him from some of his concerns of his background.

The relationship game

After the interview we usually got down on the floor to play a relationship game, as the board was so big, and the children all enjoyed this game very much. I had thought that they might enjoy drawing or prefer me to draw while they talked, but this was not the case. Possibly because of their ages and level of understanding, they were at ease simply answering the questions and talking with me. So none of the other 'games' or 'aids' to communicating difficult feelings, mentioned above, were strictly necessary.

I used the Four Field Map, which has been used with divorced families (Sturgess et al. 2001) (figure 3 on the page after next). This 'relationship game' uses a board with concentric circles, and play people; children use the play people to represent

their various family members and friends, and place them close to or distant from themselves in the centre, thus giving their perspective on relationships. I used traditional German dolls, which were much enjoyed throughout the age range. The game confirmed the children's attachments and also enabled them to talk about their birth relatives; a number of the children placed the birth mother in both the 'love' and the 'unhappy with' circles. This game has been used successfully by researchers including Neil (in ongoing research), who recommended it. I adapted it to suit the context of adoption and contact.

The identity game

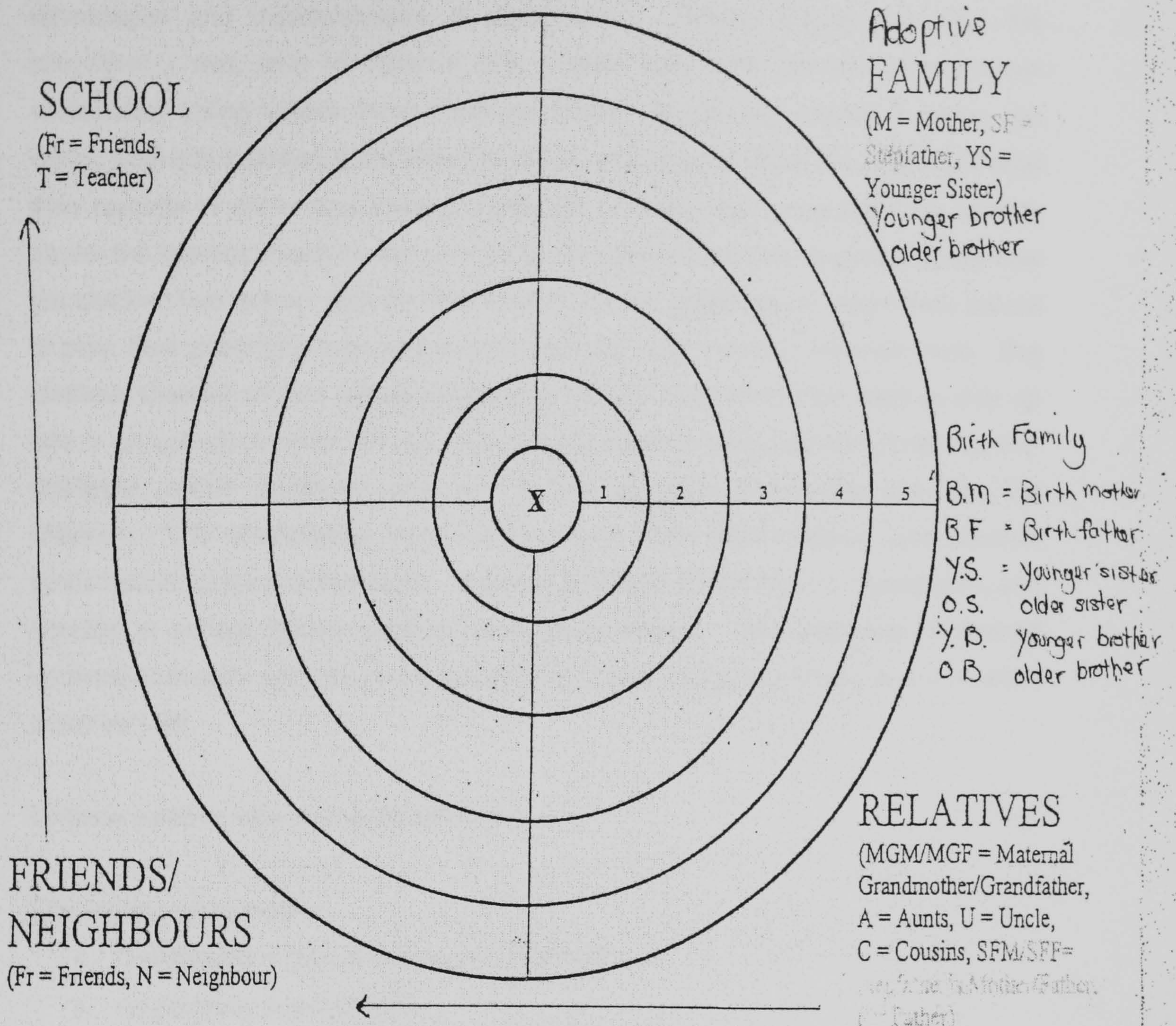
The identity game Who Do You ...? (Appendix 10) is a one-page sheet of identity questions such as, Who do you look like; talk like; behave like? Who do you get ... talents; skills and allergies; medical problems from? The children enjoyed this game and thinking through the answers. Later when parents were asked to look at it, they often reminded their children of further identity information from their own and the birth family. This was another opportunity to observe attachment relationships.

The value of the interviews

The interviews were invaluable for the rich and full transcripts they provided me with. Undertaking them was one of the most fulfilling parts of the study, for me, whilst the experience seemed to leave the adopters invigorated and not wanting the interview to finish (this was less so with most children). In the words of McCracken (1988: 9), 'The long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory. For certain descriptive and analytic purposes, no instrument of inquiry is more revealing.' Clearly the interviews took me into the minds, everyday lives, feelings, joys and fears of these adoptive parents and their children. I was left fulfilled by their generosity with their time and by their openness, but also exhausted.

After the interviews I sent the families a card thanking them for their generosity with their time, their openness, and many cups of tea.

Figure 3: The relationship game



The circles indicate the child's feelings about the people placed in them: 1 Really love, 2 Love, 3 Like, 4 Don't like, 5 Really unhappy with.

Reproduced with thanks from:

Sturgess, W., Dunn, J. and Davies, L. (2001) Young children's perceptions of their relationship with family members: links with family setting, friendships, and adjustment, *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 25, 6: 521-529.

Observations: the application of attachment theory

I took heed of McCracken (1988:28), 'When some kind of participant observation is possible, it has dramatic advantages... Indeed, it is in some cases the only way to obtain reliable data.' I also used some guidelines of Woofell (2002) on the ethics, advantages and disadvantages of observation. Before, during and after the interviews I was able to observe the children and their parents in numerous situations. Using criteria from Fahlberg (1988: 32-33) (see below) I noted: the caring gestures between them after the relationship game, when the children invited their parents to come and have it explained to them; the same after the identity game; the interest shown by the parents in the games and their enquiries about how the children had 'got on' with the interview; the warm greetings on return from school or play; their goodnight hugs and kisses; the easy, warm banter between them. The children showed off and tested boundaries whilst I was there, and tried to stay up late or go out with friends. It was interesting to observe their parents' gentle but firm discipline, which usually worked, with a few grumbles and testing out from the children. The comfortable reciprocity between them was obvious, and another confirmation of their attachment. I noted parental supervision of homework and interest in school leisure pursuits and sponsorships. The evidence of shared interests between parents and children was clear during my visits, and I noted it down as I left.

Criteria used in observing attachment

The criteria were these:

- comfortableness with closeness and touch
- responding appropriately
- good eye contact and appropriate smiling
- positive interactions with siblings and friends
- developing a conscience
- satisfaction with school performance
- acceptance of reasonable limits
- developing outside interests and responsibilities for chores
- acceptance of negative feelings
- appearing comfortable with her or his sexual identity
- appearing generally relaxed rather than rigid

Observations and the use of the attachment framework are further examined below.

Analysis

I used qualitative analysis as a flexible instrument to capture the way adoptive parents and their children see and experience contact in the context of everyday family life and relationships and the children's sense of identity. So the object of my analysis was to determine the categories of attachment and identity and any relationships between them. I used the literature review to compare, contrast, and support my findings, and to identify any gaps in the research. Much of the literature concentrates on the views of adoptive parents and the researchers did not interview the children, so I relied heavily on Thomas et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002) and Smith and Logan (2004), who did.

The advantages of researching in a familiar culture were my long, profound and close personal knowledge of adoption, adopters, children and the insight I had into their world. 'The object is to draw out of one's own experience the systematic properties of the topic, separating the structural from the episodic, and the cultural from the idiosyncratic' McCracken (1988:32). But I also took McCracken's advice on carrying out a cultural review, which takes into account how familiarity with the subject and culture has the potential to dull the researcher's powers of observation and analysis. For example, I had assumed, as do most practitioners, that contact was highly beneficial to adoptive parents and their children, and this had seemed to be the view of the parents when I was preparing families for adoptive parenting. However, whilst adopters viewed contact as a source or potential source of information for the children and this was why they did it, many found it emotionally and practically complex and for some adoptive mothers it was a source of profound despair.

My initial plan was to transcribe the interviews myself as soon as possible after they took place; ideally I planned to do this the following day and organise my interviews and diary accordingly and I did transcribe a few. However, I soon took the advice of McCracken (1988) and Silverman (2005), to have the transcripts done by a professional in this field of research, to avoid becoming too closely involved with the material and the time-consuming process. The adopters' interviews had lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours for each child discussed, and most families had two children, whose own interviews took half an hour to an hour each, so the total transcribing time would have been at least 28 hours for each family.

The transcriber I used was experienced in this type of research, and produced verbatim transcripts which she emailed, as well as posting the diskettes to me. Had I tried to do the transcribing myself, I would still be doing it now. My transcriber became interested in the stories of the adopters and their children, enabling her to become familiar with the terms they used, such as birth mother, which initially she transcribed as 'both mothers'. However, the few mistakes were evident to me in reading the transcripts and listening to the tapes. Listening was difficult, as I had interviewed the adoptive couples together and inevitably there were interruptions and crossovers in the conversations. Two of the boys had a tendency to whisper and parts of their narrative were lost. In one interview with a child I did not successfully record on the reverse side of the tape. Fortunately this was discovered immediately afterwards and I wrote up the missing part of the interview from memory; however, I must have lost some of the details.

I carried out my analysis by hand, with guidance from Ian Sinclair (personal communication 2004). I did however experiment with the Atlas/ti software, but found the manual method I had begun with quicker and better suited to myself and my data. Shaw (2003: 3) advises picking a package to do what you want it to do, but with the proviso that detailed analysis needs to be done by hand. A detailed manual analysis also helped me to avoid the risk of data fragmentation and of the interview getting divorced from its context (Bryman 2001: 389). In this way I was able to draw out themes, links and correlations that related to my main questions, and also to follow up any new and seemingly salient themes which emerged from the transcripts.

I read and reread the data. Bryman (2001: 388) cites Miles (1979) who calls the data an 'attractive nuisance', referring to its wonderful richness but too great abundance. Clearly I had to be methodical and careful in finding a way through it and getting the most out of it without getting lost and daunted. Considering its vastness before I began was frightening, but the use of a system of colour coding, charts and highlighting made it more manageable, so that it retained its interest and sense of discovery for me, as when I discovered some salient gender differences. Making notes of any themes, initially in the margins, helped me interpret and theorise, being mindful of Bryman's (2001: 399) advice about 'not being a mere mouthpiece.' I spent time, which was worthwhile, in wondering, speculating, reasoning and guessing. Answers sometimes emerged or evolved, and in other cases remained an enigma, material for further research. I moved on to using

different colours of paper for the main themes of attachment, identity and contact, though I thought of doing this only later in my analysis.

I used McCracken's (1988: 41) five stages of analysis. First, I read the transcripts intensely and made observations. Secondly, I developed these observations using the evidence in the text and the literature review. For example, I had observed that many children enjoyed contact with their siblings, and the literature of Thomas et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002), and Smith and Logan (2004) supported this. Thirdly, observations were scrutinised in relation to each other, as I moved on from the script. Themes were emerging and becoming clearer, such as the finding that a group of adoptive mothers had profound feelings of despair at the time of contact. Fourthly, it was time to make judgments, when the process of 'harvest and winnow' had elicited and uncovered the general themes within attachment, identity and contact. I determined their interrelationships and organised them. These were very important stages in my argument. For example, all but one child in each group, with and without contact, were securely attached and had well-formed identities; therefore contact was not the main influence on attachment and identity. Fifthly, I reviewed the stage-four conclusions, from all of the interviews, and examined the emergent themes. At this stage my thinking moved from considering the individuals to the thoughts and actions of the groups in general. Initially I had some difficulty with letting go of the individuals and their personal quotes, which were sometimes profound. With some constructive criticism from my supervisor I did manage to change my thinking and move on to the general.

I used some large charts, one for families with contact and another for those with no contact, to list biographical details, attachment achievements, identity goals, and attitudes to contact, as well as new themes, such as the length of time it took children to settle, adoptive mothers' feelings of despair, gender differences, and so on. Coloured pencils enabled me to further code in the charts styles of attachment and identity. For example, when children mentioned food it was coloured green, safety and security were coloured red, physical closeness was orange, and so on. Taking the advice of colleagues and of Bryman (2001: 398) I coded as I went along in order not to be overwhelmed by the huge quantity of material.

Making connections and developing concepts, with the aid of the charts, enabled me to form mental pictures of the groups and themes. This in turn helped me consider in more detail how my study related to the existing literature, showed up gaps in it, and helped me find further themes emerging from my analysis. For example,

Quinton et al. (1998) and Neil (2004) found that older-placed children often take longer to settle than young babies. My study confirmed this and went on to show that many of the older-placed children took a length of time to become secure similar to their age at placement. Sykes (2000: 6) too found adoptive fathers to be less positive than their wives about contact, but I also noted in my study that I had interviewed a higher percentage of both men and women than Sykes or Smith and Logan (2004), so perhaps my conclusion was more reliable.

Whilst analysing I did highlight and note quotes for the different main topics. Having my interview schedule divided into sections on the three main topics of attachment, identity and contact, was helpful during the analysis; although there was some overlap, this was the exception. I felt that quotes evidenced and illustrated my findings very well. So many of them seemed like gifts that I was guilty of overusing them in almost every paragraph of my findings chapter. I was concerned about some of the quotes being very emotive and perhaps too identifiable. So I have now reduced them, but feel in doing so that they have lost some of their power.

A presentation by Corden and Sainsbury (2005) of their findings from a study of the use of verbatim quotations was most helpful. Their participants had liked the spoken word to be used, saying that the diversity showed that the researchers had done their work. It was also good to be wanted, they said, and to have their contributions used; it showed they had something to say. However, participants were unhappy to be categorised, seeing this as a way of emphasising difference or attracting negative judgements, and this created for the researchers ‘... tensions between respecting and representing diversity’ (Corden and Sainsbury 2005: 3).

The micro-analysis of contact or no contact in the context of adoptive families’ everyday relationships, and analysis of what they perceived as the benefits or hindrances of contact for the children’s attachments and identity, seemed to me to be a valuable way of examining and gaining a fuller understanding of these issues. Though I was aware from the literature of Bryman (2001), McCracken (1988) and Silverman (2005) that having preconceived ideas about my study was dangerous, this did not prevent me from having some: I was strongly in favour of contact. However, the data analysis and findings showed my preconceptions to be quite flawed, as the following chapters will confirm.

Causal connections

During the analysis I found that despite work on the interview schedule and prompts, the 'causal accounts' made, by one or two adopters and none of the children, between contact and family relationships were tentative, like some fine silk thread which was maybe there and nearly grasped, and always except once or twice broke or blew away. Generally, the meaning of contact in connection with the good attachment relationships with their children, did not feature in the lives of adopters, not even when I prompted their thinking in this direction.

Although it was not one of my main aims, I went on to make my own judgements on this from my observations and analysis. I too had some difficulty making valid causal connections; however, after pondering about the issue I made, I think, some salient connections. Firstly, it was clear from their narratives that all the parents in both groups understood the benefits of contact, namely receiving or hoping to receive information. Those who had contact felt it was their children's right, and said they did it for the children. Secondly, carrying out contact with the birth family, talking with their children about it and involving them, was clearly showing an interest in their children, which professionals generally believe promotes attachment and engenders openness, which in turn contributes to comfortableness and closeness – in other words to attachment. In my professional role I brought these beliefs to my research, but generally adoptive parents had not, except for one mother in each group. The mother with contact told me, 'Since the day I told her I'd met her mum, she's not said that she misses her. And it's changed, she's become more settled. I showed her some photographs of the two of us sat together ... I felt better coming out of that meeting ... I thought, she's mine, I said, cor, I feel brilliant.' Even this statement is a tentative connection but it implies a growing closeness and comfortableness between the adoptive mother and her daughter.

However, in the case of the group without contact they too had given their children the information they were given about the birth family and its circumstances, and except in one case had told their children they would support a future meeting with the birth mother or siblings. This was confirmed by the children, who knew their parents were interested in them and had answered their questions about their background as far as they could; so they could trust them. Therefore the parents' open communication and interest in their children's backgrounds promoted attachment; having no contact clearly was not a hindrance to attachment, as I had assumed it would be. Brodzinsky (2005) found that in traditionally closed or very

open adoptions it was not the level of contact which was important to the children's wellbeing but rather the open communication in families.

Identity was much easier for the adopters and children in both groups to make causal connections with; they were able to connect identity and the information gained from contact. It is so easy to identify physical features, personality traits, and talents such as musicality and sport and art. The analysis showed that both children and parents were able to make these connections, that the children had inherited some of these features from their birth families. At the same time children and parents considered that some of their identity formation was from their adoptive family. Chloe, a ten-year-old, in response to my question 'Do you think contact has made any difference to what you know about yourself, about who you are?', and after a prompt about photos, said, 'It does [make a difference to what I know] if I look at them, I can look in the mirror and see if I look like them. I do look a bit like my birth mum. But there again my birth dad had the darker hair' (like hers). So identity was much simpler than attachment to connect with contact.

The families without contact also, as discussed above, had given their children identity information and photos of the birth family, given to them at placement by the social worker. One boy in this group told me he might have received photographs had he had contact. So causal accounts were given in the case of identity and contact. I had also made these connections in my analysis. So a case may be made for the ability of qualitative methods to identify cause and effect. Shaw (2003: 69) cites Miles and Huberman (1994): ' "The conventional view is that qualitative studies are only good for exploratory forays, for developing hypotheses – and that strong explanations, including causal attributions, can be derived only through quantitative studies." They describe this view as "mistaken" (Miles and Huberman 1994: 147), and insist that the qualitative research can

1. Identify causal mechanisms
2. Deal with complex networks
3. Sort out the temporal dimensions of events.'

I too was able to 'cycle back and forth between different levels of variables and processes' (Shaw 2003: 69) in my analysis to make these causal connections. This was not what I had set out to do, but it is there. Further research, particularly into the connections between attachment and contact, would be needed to explore these issues further.

Though the parents and children value their relationships immensely, they have not profoundly considered that there may or may not be links between attachment, identity and contact in the way that my study has done. Despite this conclusion I was left wondering if my questions and interviewing skills could have been better. So, while Howe's study was not in quite the same context as mine, I found his remarks on the judgement of adoptive children's developmental outcomes reassuring: 'Given the complex interactions between children and their environments, assessing the risks and protective forces that may affect a child's development requires the reasoning skills of the philosopher as well as the investigative skills of the scientist' (Howe 1998: 6).

Analysis (continued)

I have taken great care to tell the children's and parents' stories as they were told to me, and to hold onto an accurate narrative which tells how *they* feel, perceive and experience adoption and contact in their everyday lives, and what it all means to *them*. I had striven to avoid interpreting matters in my own terms, or the children's statements in adult terms, but kept to what the interviewees told me, while simultaneously taking account of any diversionary tactics and hesitations, and also using my intuition in the analysis. I wished to present the parents' and children's own perceptions and accounts of what contact or the lack of it means to them in their everyday life and in relation to their relationships and the children's identity. However, it was also important for me to make my own judgements from my analysis, observations and findings.

Whilst listening to the voices and the views of the parents in my study and being determined to represent them accurately I was aware, from the analysis and the literature, that I had used my own 'expert' voice. I often talked about attachment, which the adopters understood to a degree, but I used other terms for it, such as 'affection, closeness and how you show you love each other', with parents and children. Chase (2005: 664) helpfully developed a typology of three voices or narrative strategies used by researchers as they wrestle with the question of how to use their voices.

Firstly, the researcher's authoritative voice often connects and separates the researcher's and narrator's voice, for instance by using a quote followed by analysis and discussion. However, she cites Denzin's criticism of this: 'We do not return to

the narrator and ask if our analysis is accurate' (Denzin 1997: 249). So there is the danger that we colour what narrators say with our own academic interest. However, using quotes allows the readers to make their own analysis. Secondly, the supportive voice is explained as the uninterrupted story of the narrator. The researcher's voice is annulled and the narrator is named as the author. Thirdly, the interactive voice displays the complex interaction, the intersubjectivity between researcher's and narrator's voices. The concept of the researcher using the interactive voice comes from the fact that researchers need to understand themselves if they are to understand how they interpret narrators' stories, *and* that readers need to understand *researchers'* stories (about their intellectual and personal relationships with narrators as well as the cultural phenomena at hand) if readers are to understand narrators' stories (Chase 2005: 264). Thus the researcher is using a kind of reflexive practice here.

Conclusion: strengths and weaknesses

I conclude this chapter with some of the strengths and weaknesses of my methodology. Some weaknesses I was aware of from the beginning, others emerged as the study progressed, and I have addressed them above.

Strengths of the methodology were these. I compared groups with and without contact, which is unique. I used a qualitative method appropriate to the sensitive focus of the study. I listened to the voices of the children as well as the adults; hearing the views of both enabled me to check the consistency between them. I used attachment and identity theory as a framework to analyse and explain what I was observing and hearing, and supplemented this with the use of games.

I interviewed the two parents together. This might be considered a weakness; but it enabled me to record immediately the consistency between them as they supplemented or qualified each other's statements. There was also a good practical reason for this: neither they nor I had the time or energy for any more interviews. However, Smith and Logan (2004) did interview couples separately, and found (much to my relief) that their views were complementary.

Two weaknesses which I was aware of before the study, were my use of a self-selected sample and of some adoptive families who were known to me. I also have some other 'reservations with hindsight' (Shaw, personal communication 2005) about my method, discussed earlier. The concise postal questionnaire led to lost

information and misunderstanding. I used a professional classification of contact which did not take into account how adopters would consider contact. Initially I relied heavily on the literature of McCracken and Silverman, but remedied this on the advice of Ian Shaw. My group without contact had one fewer family than the group with contact, and the group without contact had three families with some earlier experiences of contact. Working at 'home' could be considered both a strength and a weakness.

Despite its vulnerabilities, and although my qualitative analysis was daunting and exhausting – but I hope exhaustive, this research was nearly always enjoyable and immensely enlightening.

Chapter 6

Findings

Introduction

To put my findings in perspective I shall briefly review the context, aims and theoretical framework. The methodology and the structure and rationale of the semi-structured interview schedule are fully outlined in the previous chapter.

Context

The study is an exploratory one, examining attachment, identity and contact in the context of adoptive family relationships, in two groups of families; one group had some form of contact with the birth family and the other did not have any current contact. I researched the occurrence of features and indicators of attachment and identity in both groups. The purpose is to examine closely the meaning of contact in adoptive family life and relationships, how it is perceived and considered by members of the family, and how in their view it has affected their attachment relationships and the promotion of identity in their children.

My aim was not to test for causal relationships between contact, attachment and identity, as explained in chapter 5. But I was aware that links or connections might be suggested by the data and I proposed to remain watchful for this possibility.

Aims

The aims of the study are:

- To understand the significance and meaning of contact or of no contact for adoptive families, their attitude to contact, the value they place on it, and the effects it has on their everyday lives.
- To analyse how contact is perceived by the adopters and their children, as a help or a hindrance to relationships, the promotion of the children's identity, and family life in general.
- To explore attachment relationships within the family and the children's sense of identity.

- To review the literature, to compare the findings of similar research with mine, and to identify gaps in research. Though this is a small study, of nineteen families in all, there is no other similar British study looking at one group of families with contact and one without.

Theoretical framework

Attachment and identity theory were chosen as my theoretical frameworks because they are fundamental in the field of adoption and contact. Attachment theory, as a theory of relationships and personalities, of the secure base and the making and breaking of affectional bonds, gives an understanding of these in the context of adoption and contact. It is my tool for understanding relationships in the context of adoptive family life and contact, and the elusive influence of each on the other. Identity theory is essential to understanding the adopted child and her knowledge of her background, in both groups with and without contact; how this information has been promoted in her new family; and how it has influenced her identity formation. It helps me consider the benefits of contact for identity formation, for some but not all children all the time.

Major themes

The focus here is on major themes in the lives and relationships of two groups of adoptive families and their children aged between six and 18 years. The children's and parents' feelings and experiences of attachment, identity and contact are examined through semi-structured questionnaires, a relationship game, an identity game, and observation. Some themes additional to attachment, identity and contact were conceptualised during the analysis process and are dealt with later.

This chapter is organised in sections covering each of these findings, beginning with contact. In each section I look first at the children and parents with contact, then at families without contact. For each group of families the sample of all respondents is described and further defined in tables. After giving details about the sample, I describe how the questions were asked and how I conceptualised the responses, that is, the feelings, perceptions and attitudes that were elicited. Then I present the findings for the group, the children first and then the parents.

The meaning of contact in family life: contact group

Children's perceptions of contact in the context of family life

Sample

As Table 1 on the next page illustrates, the group comprised eight girls and five boys aged between six and 16. Age at placement ranged from eleven months to ten years. All but one (who was relinquished) were removed from their birth families by court orders. The adopters reported one child with learning disabilities and two children who were gifted. There were four sibling groups of two and one group of three biologically related children, placed together; one family had a group of three adopted children who were biologically not related; another two unrelated children were placed with one family; one girl was placed in a family with another adopted child and an older boy born to the family; one adopted girl was the only child in her family; one boy's adoptive family had a child born to them four years after his placement. The younger siblings of the 13 children in the group were not included in the total number because they were not fully interviewed. All of the children were physically healthy and all but one were emotionally secure at the time of the interview.

Table 1: Children with contact who were interviewed

Name	Family	Age at placement (years: months)	Age at interview	Education as reported
Fiona	A	3:9	14	Doing OK
Dan	A	1:5	12	Dyspraxia; doing OK
Trinnie	B	3:3	11	Borderline special needs
Robert	B	2:3	10	Former special needs; dyslexia; now doing well
Kate	C	9:0	15 ³ / ₄	Average; doing well
Sam	C	7:0	13 ³ / ₄	Works hard; has learning support
Terri	D	0:11	6	Doing well
Dori	E	6:0	7	Very bright
Tom	F	1:6	6	Doing well
Chloe	G	1:0	10	Gifted
Holly	H	10:0	12	Doing well at school for special needs
Tarra	I	3:0	6 ³ / ₄	Very bright
Kyle	J	1:5	9 ³ / ₄	Doing well

Conceptualisation and questions

My conceptualisation of these children's feelings, perceptions and attitudes to their contact is based on their answers to the semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 7). Its purpose is fully examined in the Methodology chapter. The structure was intended to put the children at ease, so I began by asking: Who do you have contact with? What do you like about contact, what are you not so keen on? Do you know why you could not live with your birth mum?

Nature and variety of contact

Table 2 demonstrates the type and frequency of contact:

Table 2: Contact: with whom, type of contact, and its frequency

With whom	Face-to-face	Letterbox	Reciprocal
Birth mother	1 child once a month	5 children, annually	1
Birth father	1 child once a month		
Siblings	8 children in 5 families, meeting 2-5 or more times a year	5 children, annually	2
Grandmother	2 children in 1 family, twice yearly	None	
Grandparents	None	Annually - 2 sets of g'parents from one family	None

Direct, face-to-face contact

Nine children from five of the families have face-to-face contact. There are variations in whom the contact is with, how often it takes place, why and where it happens, and who organises it. In one case the child has face-to-face contact with her birth mother and separate face-to-face contact with her birth father and brother. In another contact is with the maternal birth grandmother. In the other four it is with siblings.

Two full siblings Fiona and Dan have direct contact with their maternal grandmother twice annually, usually in the school holidays. This initially took place at the adopters' home, but as the children have grown up they sometimes go out for the day and return for afternoon tea. The contact lasts from about 9.30am until 5pm. This family accepts birthday and Christmas presents and cards from the children's birth mother. Birth grandma and adoptive mum arrange contact between them; usually birth grandma telephones and makes the arrangements with adoptive mum. There is a court order for contact in this family.

The second family with direct contact, the Inghams, has face-to-face contact between their three children Trinnie, Robert and Laura, and their full sister Fallon, who is placed with other adopters. They initially met in every school holiday, but this has lessened to two or three times annually as the children have matured and have more school, leisure and family commitments. The Inghams usually drive to the other family, as they have a car and the other does not. Like the first family described, they used to spend time in the house and garden together, but now they sometimes go out for lunch or to somewhere of interest to the children. They spend about half the day together and organise this between themselves. They all enjoy this and describe it as like extended family get-togethers. There is also indirect contact with the children's birth mother and father (who is with a different partner) in the form of an annual newsletter and photographs. The birth father has reciprocated with a newsletter, but this stopped when he encountered family problems. The birth mother sent one letter which was inappropriate. Photographs have been requested from the birth mother but not received. There is a court order for the contact in this family.

A third family, Una and her daughter Dori, has face-to-face contact with Dori's half-brother Kevin, currently three times a year, though it will reduce to twice. Kevin is placed with foster carers in another part of the country and it is planned that he will take up a therapeutic residential placement soon. He is accompanied by his social worker during the meetings, which often take place at a stately home with children's amusements. The contact lasts for about half a day and is arranged between Kevin's social worker and Una. There is indirect letterbox contact between the birth and adoptive mothers twice annually. This consists of newsletters, photographs and also birthday and Christmas cards and gift vouchers from the birth mother. The two mothers have met once, and photographs were taken and shown to Dori. Una found this meeting and the photographs most helpful, if daunting.

In the fourth family there is face-to-face contact between twelve-year-old Holly and her birth father and brother monthly. She also has separate monthly contact with her birth mother. The contact takes place at a local family centre and is supervised by a worker there. Holly enjoys meeting her brother, but does not enjoy the time spent with her birth mother and father and wishes it to stop or be reduced. Contact is by order of the court.

In the fifth family Kate and Sam, both teenagers, have direct contact with their younger brother Timothy, adopted elsewhere. This contact happens quite frequently

at each others' homes or for celebration outings. During Sam's interview Timothy and his adoptive mum arrived and invited Sam and Kate and their adoptive mum Nell to join them in flying Timothy's new kite. Before doing this they had lunch together. Nell sends a book of news and photographs to the children's birth mother twice yearly, through the local authority. This is not reciprocated despite requests for news and photographs of birth mother. Nell is positive about all the contact; Sam likes that with his brother but is indifferent about the letter to his birth mother. Kate enjoys seeing Timothy and his family but is angry about the letter and information to her birth mother, and feels it should stop. The children and their adoptive mother recently had a one-off meeting with their birth father and this went well. Kate hopes to meet with her birth mother sometime in the near future.

Indirect contact

The five remaining families have indirect contact with members of their children's birth families. All of these adopters send an annual newsletter to their children's birth mothers through the local authority adoption agency. Four of the families also enclose photographs of the children. Two of the families also send photographs to birth grandparents. Two of the families have reciprocal letterbox contact, which includes photographs, with older birth sisters. In one case this annual, in the other twice yearly. It can also be seen from the information on the families with direct contact that all but one of the adoptive mothers send newsletters and photographs to their children's birth mothers. One birthfather of the above group is sent a newsletter and photographs.

Reciprocal contact from birth parents

Indirect letterbox contact, one way from the adopters to the birth family, was found to be the major type of contact. It was only reciprocated by two birth parents; one was a birth father, and his contact stopped when difficulties arose in his life. One birth mother sends a short, sad, repetitive, almost identical letter every year. Trinnie (see above) has asked for photographs and information, but these have never been sent. Nell, an adoptive mum who sends a full and informative book of the children's activities, illustrated with photographs, has been requesting a photograph from the birth mother for nearly eight years and has not yet received one.

Thus from my ten families with contact only two had a letter back from the birth parents. From my practice experience I found that birth parents have little support and preparation for writing letters: they say they feel unworthy and have boring,

unsuccessful lives, so what can they say (they ask) in a letter to their child or the adopters. This was also found by Smith and Logan (2004) and Neil (2004).

Findings: children with contact

- All 13 children with contact described themselves as happy and enjoying family life.
- They identified the ups and downs of family life, such as rules and boundaries and arguments with siblings.
- They were aware that boundaries were based on their parents' caring.
- What they liked most was belonging to and being part of a family; feeling secure and properly parented and nurtured; feeling comfortable and at ease about approaching their parents when anxious or not well or needing to confide in them; having parents who accept their background and are comfortable about discussing it with them.
- Siblings are important to them, whether they are full or half biological siblings in placement with them, or unrelated adoptive siblings, or siblings born to their adoptive parents.
- The children significantly enjoyed contact with their birth siblings placed elsewhere, although the relationship they had with these siblings was described as being more like that with cousins. One boy described his birth siblings as not really siblings 'like my two sisters here.'
- One girl aged 10 was an exception: her mother thought she was not quite so secure. This is developed below in the sections on attachment and identity, and in the Discussion (chapter 7).
- Family life comprised the normal family business, school and leisure, fun and tellings-off, parents being there for them, and comfort, love and security.
- Face-to-face contact happened some few times a year and was seen as a treat or an outing, with one exception.
- Indirect contact was experienced in a matter-of-fact way by all but three of the older girls, who were angry and wished the contact to stop.
- If there was reciprocal news from their birth mother or father or siblings this was read with parents and often filed in their lifestory book, which was usually available to them.
- All the children were aware of the contact and at an appropriate age added their drawings and notes. Neil (2004) points out that this is not always the case in some families, and so do Grotevant et al. (1998).

It was implicit from the children's interviews that contact was not a significant everyday feature of family life for any of them, but something which happened once or twice a year, a link with their original family. This was true for all but one girl, who had frequent direct contact with her birth parents and older brother once per month.

Four of the 13 children enjoyed contact. Two of these children were a brother (12) and sister (14) placed together, who had direct contact with their maternal grandmother, often in their adoptive home, twice annually. Fiona explained:

That she [grandma] still comes, and she is really happy to see us, does make us feel reassured that she does still love us. She really talks to my [adoptive] mum ... I do get to know a lot of stuff off her through my mum ... like Bev [birth mum] is OK right now and she's stopped the drugs.

Four children liked the face-to-face contact with their siblings, but two of these did not like the letterbox contact with their birth mothers and one birth father. One of these four children did not like the face-to-face contact with her birth parents although she too liked contact with her older brother.

Eleven-year-old Trinnie, who was placed with two of her siblings, explained what she liked and disliked about contact with her birth mother and with her sister, adopted in another family:

I see my sister Fallon ... She's like me, she has blue eyes and we act the same as each other cos when I sometimes go to her house we get used to each other and share and play ... I see my mum writing to her but I ain't never had a letter from her. Why does she want to know about us anyway, because she doesn't care, does she? ... I didn't really know and wasn't really happy with my birth mum.

- Thus five children in the study enjoyed seeing their siblings, although the relationship seemed more like that of cousins than brothers and sisters: Holly, who was placed in a family with an adopted child and a homegrown child, and Kate and Sam, and Robert and Trinnie, who were two sets of siblings placed together.
- The children were reassured that their siblings were safe and well, and it seemed to be meaningful to see others whose looks and personalities resembled theirs.

- However, none of these children expressed any desire to see their birth parents. Holly did have contact with hers and did not enjoy it.
- Kate and Trinnie, as described above, wanted their mums to stop sending news and photographs to their birth mothers, although they did want to have a one-off meeting with their birth mothers in the future to address some unanswered questions. The girls were angry with their birth mothers, perhaps expressing feelings of what a mother should be. This will be explored in the next chapter.
- Their two brothers were more matter-of-fact and somewhat indifferent about their birth mothers. This will too be explored further in the Discussion chapter.
- Five children seemed to be matter-of-fact or indifferent about the contact.

Kyle, aged nine, had recently written a note to his birth mother to accompany his adoptive mother's newsletter and photographs. About contact he said:

I just think she can write a letter if she wants to ... I wrote about what I like and everything ... She doesn't usually write, it's usually us that writes.

Parents' perceptions of contact in the context of family life

Sample

The adoptive parents, aged from 36 to 56, comprised seven married couples and three lone mothers. Two of these latter had adopted as lone mothers, the other had adopted jointly with her husband from whom she is now separated. They were all white, English and middleclass, a fairly typical sample of adoptive parents (see Triseliotis et al. 1997). All had attended preparation groups, but one had missed part of the three-day session. Four of the families had court orders for contact and six had informal agreements through their adoption agency. Smith and Logan (2004) found that families without a court order for contact imposed upon them were more comfortable and positive about contact, feeling more in control.

Only one of the adoptive families had met their children's birth mother; two had met the birth father, and at least five would have liked to meet the birth mother. However, the child's social worker, had advised against this because of the birth mother's mental health problems, or that the birth mother had remained sad and angry following the court decision that her children should be adopted, or because her way of coping was to block thoughts of her children's adoption.

How the questions were asked

Data about the parents' feelings and perspectives on the meaning of contact in family life and relationships were gathered from the semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 7). The questions included: What does contact mean to you? What do you like or find helpful about contact? What do you not like or find unhelpful? What does your child like, not like about contact? Why do you do it? All of the parents answered in an honest and genuine way, sometimes briefly, but usually quite fulsomely.

Findings: parents in the group with contact

- All of the parents in the 10 families with contact perceived some benefits for their children, themselves and the birth mother.
- Even an adoptive father who felt very angry about contact because his children had experienced very serious neglect, recognised that his son wanted and needed some indirect and possibly, later, some direct contact.
- The perceived benefits were maintaining links for the future and receiving or hoping to receive information for their children.

Parents were more explicit than their children about contact and their perceptions of the meaning it had for their children in family life. Their views were sometimes different from the perceptions of their children. Parents as well as their children clearly enjoyed being a family, and whilst they took and made opportunities to talk to their children about their background, contact was not an everyday feature; life was full of other, more immediate and salient family matters, such as holidays, school, cooking, leisure such as swimming, netball, and learning to play a musical instrument, and for the teenagers 'hanging out with their friends.'

Ed, adoptive father of the two teenagers who see their grandmother twice a year, on the one hand feels contact is alright, and he appreciates the children and their birth grandmother's enjoyment in seeing each other. On the other hand he feels adoption should be a clean break. Considering the meaning of contact in family life, he responded:

When it happens it's alright, but what we're saying is, it shouldn't have happened in the first place. We're dealing with it, and it's not creating major issues ... But it doesn't disrupt family life, it doesn't put unreasonable pressure on the family, it's just a twice-yearly pissing-off ... Classic Fiona is,

she seems to take things at face value ... Yeh, she's got school, she's got a family, she's got a boyfriend.

Ed and his wife Maggie shared these views, believing that they would feel more comfortable with indirect contact involving letters and photographs. However, since their children enjoyed it – and have done for over ten years – they would not change this. It is possible that a voluntary contact arrangement would have felt more comfortable for these adopters than the court order.

Another adoptive father of two younger children described his feelings about contact and how it was perceived by his daughter:

It never really bothers me at all, you know, I don't feel it's threatened in any way by it ... I don't think, oh there's somebody else out there that's involved with her. I just think, I just love them to bits. Tarra ... she sort of thinks, well, if they want to contact me they can do, but if they don't I'm getting on with my life and doing what I'm going to do, and I think that's how she is, you know, she's just, she's too busy.

These quotes illustrate the variety of feelings about contact in this group. Parents often had ambivalent feelings, like Ed who on the one hand says it's not creating major issues, while on the other he is indignant. The other father (who has voluntary contact) feels less threatened (see also Smith and Logan 2004). Both fathers recognise that their children take it in their stride and get on with their lives.

For most of the group, the lack of information from the birth parents was a grievance. Marie, adoptive mother of three children between two and six, sends letters and photographs annually to the three birth mothers and two sets of grandparents. She receives irregular brief, sad and repetitive letters from her older daughter's birth mother. Her response to being asked what contact meant for her and her family was:

I don't know if they think anything about it [contact], it's just that normal to be like this. When we first did it I was very frightened of what to write ... Now I think it's great. I think because of the type of person she is and wants to know everything, I think it will help her more ... I think Terri will want to meet her mum ... I'd go with Terri, I'd be there, I'd probably have a little bit of nerves but ...

Two of the single mothers also felt overwhelmingly positive about contact. One of these, Nell, mother of two teenage siblings, annually sends a book of news and photographs to their birth mother. They also meet the children's younger brother and his adoptive family regularly. Nell's responses to the questions about the meaning of contact for her and her children were:

I think it's good because it's good for them for the future. But it has to be on their terms, shouldn't be something that should be forced on them ... What does it mean for me? I think it means that hopefully the children can grow up with feeling more complete. I think, with seeing their baby brother, it's enforced the feeling of family really ... Sam knows his dad cares about him and Kate, they've got that connection there, that somebody else does care about them, from the past ... Sam's a bit indifferent to it really at the moment [to sending information to his birth mum]... Kate's real angry and ... resentful.

These two mothers, Nell and Marie, have positive feelings towards contact and showed a considerable level of acceptance of the birth family and of the importance of links – past, present and future- for their children. Each parent is at a different life stage. Nell has older-placed teenagers who have experienced very serious neglect and abuse, so they have been very challenging children. Marie and Hal have three children under six who were each placed separately as young babies. This may explain their positive attitude to contact. Although initially 'frightened' of writing the contact letter they felt well prepared and were aware that contact could be a useful link in future for their daughter if she wished a direct meeting with her birth mother. Nell too shares these feelings about 'keeping the door open'. These findings will be further explored in the following chapter.

Two couples felt generally negative about contact and the third single mother also felt generally negative. Thelma, adoptive mum of Kyle and a biological son, sends a long newsletter and photographs to his birth mother once a year. However, she said:

We're not really sure how long this should go on for, whether it's indefinite, you know, till he's eighteen and able to do it for himself, or what? ... I usually end up in tears because it's just another reminder that he's not [ours]. But you go through the year just being a normal family and not even thinking of

the fact that he's adopted, and then come the beginning of March I've got to write this letter to [her], and admit he's not really mine, because in all other ways he is ... As time goes on he becomes more and more yours, you want a normal life, and it becomes a bind, it becomes less important.

This demonstrates her feelings of anxiety about contact as a reminder that the child was not completely hers. One hypothesis – that she has not fully come to terms with her infertility – is disproved by their openness in discussing contact. Furthermore, they had a child born to them after Kyle's placement. These cases will be further examined in the following chapter.

In the remaining three couples the fathers felt negative about contact while the mothers felt positive. Dorothy and Steve, adoptive parents of two siblings, send an annual newsletter to the children's birth parents, and one to the children's half-sister twice yearly, which is reciprocated. Steve expressed his negative feelings about contact, saying:

Because we get no reply back [from the birth parents] it doesn't really mean a lot. All we can do is inform the parents of what's gone on in the previous year ... We get no feedback, so the contact really means nothing ... I wouldn't say there's a lot of help in it [for the children], it's all one-way traffic.

Dorothy, added:

But the other point of view is that reading about them both, I think [for the birth parents] to then have to sit down and write a letter would be quite a challenge ... I think the contact from Tina's [half-sister] quite good, it gives another picture ... and it's nice, it's a nice letter, it's to them.

Findings from the parents with contact reflect gender. In the 10 families, comprised of 10 women and seven men,

- six women were positive,
- two men were positive,
- two women were negative,
- four men were negative,
- two women were positive and negative,
- one man was both negative and positive.

These findings reveal that the women generally felt more positive about contact than the men.

No-contact group: the meaning of contact or no contact in family life

Children's perceptions of no contact in the context of family life

Sample

Twelve children and young people (whom I shall refer to as children) were comprehensively interviewed (Table 3 on the next page), out of 14 in the no-contact group, five boys and nine girls aged from four to 18. One girl was only four, and another (13) had begun therapy, so it was not appropriate to interview these two. Three younger siblings who were keen to be involved took part in the relationship game but not the interviews. Eight of the children had been relinquished babies placed under one year old, who all settled and became securely attached soon after placement. The girl undertaking therapy was experiencing some identity problems. Six children removed from their birth parents by court order and placed at between two and five years all had complex backgrounds. Three of these children took a length of time to settle and become securely attached that corresponded to their age at placement. One boy remains anxiously attached. One girl, who has not yet been in placement for a time corresponding to her age at placement, is settling and becoming securely attached but still has some difficulties. The remaining girl placed at age five became securely attached after about eighteen months in placement. All of the children are in mainstream education, and portrayed themselves as enjoying school and doing fine, as did their parents. One boy about to enter secondary school said he was now sometimes bored with the work in his present class.

Three biologically related children were placed as a group; two biologically related children were placed together; and three groups of two biologically unrelated children were placed at different times in the same adoptive family. One girl was placed in a family with an older boy already born to them, and another boy was born to them after her placement. Three children were each placed as singletons and remain so. Two full siblings were placed in a family with two older birth sons. These figures amount to more than 14 as they include younger siblings who were not comprehensively interviewed. All of the children were in good health, and all regarded themselves as emotionally secure and belonging in their families.

Table 3: Children without contact who were interviewed

Name	Family	Age at placement (years: months)	Age at interview	Education as reported
Beth	K	4:0	14	Excellent
Trudy	K	2:0	12	Very good
Oliver	K	3:0	13	Average
Daisy	L	4:0	7	Doing OK
Lizzie	L	3:0	6	Doing well
Tanya	M	0:4	14	Doing well
Keelan	M	0:3	11	Doing well
Mark	O	0:4	14	In the top group
Tamsin	O	0:8	10	Average to fine
Laura	P	5:0	18	Fine
Ben	Q	0:4	13	Doing well
Nat	R	0:4	10	In the top group

There were similarities between the no-contact and the contact group. For example, five boys and eight girls were interviewed in each group. But in this no-contact group eight children had been placed when under one year, while the group with contact had only two children placed under one year. This confirms other findings, including Neil and Thoburn (2000), Triseliotis et al. (1997) and Quinton et al. (1998), that contact is more prevalent for older-placed children. In the group with contact only three of the children settled and became secure early in the placement; nine children took between one and seven years to settle, and one child has a less well-formed identity. One boy in the no-contact group is insecurely attached.

Two children, although in the no contact group, had had a letter from their birth mother which had been read to them by their adoptive mother. Three children, two siblings placed together and one child placed singly, had initially had short-term letterbox contact with their birth parents. The two siblings' birth parents had disappeared, so contact had stopped. The other girl and her adoptive parents had decided that the contact should stop because it was emotionally abusive, inappropriate and unreliable.

Conceptualisation and questions

Before asking the questions about contact I explained to the children about my two groups of families and asked them what they understood about contact with birth families. Most saw it as a link, some knew little about it, so I explained succinctly the kinds of contact some adoptive families had. The children's feelings and attitudes towards contact were gathered from the interview schedule (Appendix 7).

The questions were designed to elicit the children's feelings about contact and not having it. The questions included: What does the word contact mean to you? What do you think might be beneficial or good about having contact? What might be not so good? Is there anyone from your birth or foster family or any friend from your past with whom you would like to have contact? What do you understand about your past? Are there people or things in your past that you wonder about?

Findings: children in the group without contact

- All children in the no-contact group defined themselves as happy, secure and enjoying family life most of the time. This included Oliver who in my view and that of professionals involved with him, had attachment difficulties.
- Grumbles were about rules, boundaries, discipline, and disputes.

- Mostly they liked just being part of a family and belonging, appreciating the security of knowing that their family would always be there for them.
- They felt comfortable about approaching their parents when anxious, unwell or needing to confide in them, whether it was a problem with a friend or with school or a worry or question about their background.
- They felt safe, cared for and excepting Oliver trusted, and able to trust.
- Being part of a sibling group was salient and enjoyable; it made little or no difference to their feelings of love and belonging whether their siblings were birth, adoptive or born to their adoptive family.
- Four of the children anticipated that they might want to contact birth siblings of whom they were aware, or to find out if they had any siblings living elsewhere.

Children who felt negative about the possibility of contact

- Eight of the 12 children interviewed felt somewhat negative about the possibility of contact.
- Some of these negative attitudes were about feeling more comfortable about what was familiar to them, that is, not having contact.
- Much of this negativity was explicit, mostly from the five teenage girls who expressed anger towards their birth mothers.

Laura, 18 when interviewed, had been placed with her adopters at five. Initially her adoptive mother sent a newsletter and photographs to her birth mother, who reciprocated with intermittent and inappropriate messages in greetings cards. Laura explained what contact meant to her:

Nothing at all. I decided when I was six I didn't want to have anything more to do with Nancy [birth mother] ... As far as I'm concerned, these are my family, I'm happy here, we have our ups and downs, I love them to pieces, I wouldn't swop them for the world ever ... All my loyalties, like, lie in this family now, I've got a busy life, I couldn't be doing with the stress.

Laura had been angry with her birth mother, but now has an understanding of her birth mother's difficulties with relationships and why she chose a partner over her child. Laura knows she herself is not responsible for this. She is now loved for herself in a family where she knows she belongs and is valued. Laura does not present as feeling unworthy, nor is she a 'people pleaser' to avoid rejection (Kaplan and Silverstein 1989). From observation and interview she is obviously securely

attached to her adoptive family. She recognised, as did her adopters, that the initial contact with her birth mother was not appropriate or reliable, and emotionally detrimental to the attachments developing between them.

- Five of these eight negative children were teenage girls. With the exception of Laura, the oldest, they seemed to be having difficulty understanding how a mother could give up her child and choose a new partner over her child.
- Two girls who were much younger, six and seven, were ambivalent about contact. On the one hand they were concerned about their birth parents, who had disappeared, and especially about their mother; on the other they were clearly frightened of their birth parents and of any future face-to-face meetings. They are quoted in the attachment section, about concern about their birth father's 'roughness'.
- Only one boy was negative about contact and this was more implicit than explicit.
- Mark knew he was adopted, knew the basic circumstances of his birth parents, and seemed quite happy and satisfied with this.
- His adopters were less open than most parents in the group
- Mark and his sister, it seemed, had sensed their parents' slight uncomfortableness when talking about their birth family.

Mark demonstrates this, saying,

She tells me, "If you ever want to know anything all you have to do is ask."
But I usually forget.

Mark presented as a happy, secure teenager with a well-formed identity. He was busy and involved with school, leisure, friends and family pursuits. He liked family life as it was and was keen to preserve the status quo. He was neither in denial about his birth parents and adoption, nor curious about them, and nonchalant about wanting to know anything more for the moment. Howe and Feast (2000) also found that males tend to be less curious about background than females.

- Two children had equitable feelings about contact in family life. Ben (13) was placed as a relinquished baby under a year.
- He, and another boy with equitable feelings, each have a letter from their birth mother which their adoptive mother had read to them.

Ben says:

When I was about seven mum and dad started talking to me and explained it to me and I thought, oh right, it doesn't bother me much, I don't mind because it doesn't change anything really, they [mum and dad] are really nice. I've seen a picture of my real mum, she looks nice. But I wouldn't prefer, because I don't know her, but my mum and dad are better because I know them, I didn't know my birth mum ... When I get older I might want to learn a little bit more and maybe meet my birth mum, but for now I'm all right.

Ben had no strong views for or against contact. He had no experience of it and felt satisfied that he knows enough about his background for now; he might want to find out more later and perhaps meet his birth mother, and he felt comfortable about asking for his parents' support. Ben is typical of the boys in his attitudes to contact. The atmosphere in his family, as in all the others, was of warmth and open communication. Children were also able to confide in and question other members of their families such as grandma, aunt or older cousin.

Nat explained his feelings about contact, if he had had it, and whether or not having contact might affect his relationships and identity:

I could hear about how she's getting on and get a photograph ... Not really. Mum and dad have told me things from the forms ... I can always ask mum ... I'm happy, sporty, sometimes quiet, sometimes more loud. It's really good round here, because all my friends live around here. The fields and the pitch-and-put are just up the road and we know most of the neighbours, they're really nice.

Nat had more understanding about contact than most of the other children without contact because his parents had tried, unsuccessfully, to contact his birth mother. However, like Ben above, he was satisfied with what he knew about his background for the moment. So these boys exemplify the other children's attitudes and comfortableness particularly well.

All the children excepting one (Oliver – but his two sisters were comfortable), felt that they could comfortably talk to their parents about anything. Nat illustrates this above. Also characteristic of this group was fourteen-year-old Beth, who explains,

They're always there when I need somebody. They're always there to talk to and stuff like that.

Beth felt comfortable about asking her parents about difficult and personal matters. Beth also told me she has enough memories about her birth family and background, as do most of the older-placed children. However, there was a sense that she and her siblings in recent years asked little about their roots. They felt that their adopters had told them all they knew. Beth and her sister were planning to meet their birth mother in the future and had some questions to ask her, for example, whether they had any other siblings. They had asked their adopters, but they did not know. Beth's adopters were open and easy communicators generally, but were less comfortable concerning their children's backgrounds; they tended to be 'waiting for them to ask'. This will be discussed in the parents' section.

- Five of the children know that they have brothers and sisters living elsewhere.
- One girl thinks her half brother may still be with her birth mother but that it is also likely he too may now be adopted, as her birth mother tended to concentrate on her new partners rather than her children.
- Two children, placed together, knew of their two younger brothers' placement for adoption.
- One girl had a photograph of her three older sisters who were living with their birth mother.
- One boy knew he had two older brothers who remained with their birth parents.
- All but one of the children seemed satisfied with this information about their siblings.
- The two children whose brothers were placed for adoption were aware that their brothers needed a family who could provide them with physical and emotional care and 'fun', and keep them safe from harm. This knowledge would also reassure them that the responsibility for their need for adoption was their birth parents' and not theirs (Triseliotis 2000: 89).
- The two children, in separate placements, who knew that they had older siblings remaining with their birth parents understood that their parents were unable to care for *another* child, not that they could not care for *them* specifically. That is, it was not *their* responsibility, they were not bad or difficult or unlovable babies.
- Three children wondered if they had siblings, and thought that they might, later on, with the support of their parents and the local post-adoption service,

search for information about their siblings and perhaps meet them. They wondered if their siblings were adopted or fostered or had they remained with their birth mother.

Trudi, placed with two siblings, exemplifies the feelings and speculation of children who wonder about having other siblings:

Well, I do wonder if, like, I have any sisters or brothers or ... No [nobody's ever told them, mum and dad]. No-one's ever told me if I have.

Trudi, like another child in her group, while loving and feeling close to the siblings with whom she has always lived, still wonders about other siblings elsewhere. The closeness of siblings is important to everyone, especially in adoptive families (Triseliotis 2000, quoted below in the identity section; Rushton et al. 2001; Lord and Borthwick 2001). Siblings can be our most constant and lifelong attachment figures.

However, it was very clear from these children that the lack of contact with their birth families was not a salient feature in their lives or relationships or in their sense of identity (Brodzinsky 2005) supports this. Their answers to the contact questions were matter-of-fact and brief. Nat, interviewed when he was ten, gave responses which were typical of the group, thoughtful but brief. The degree of openness and comfortableness in family communication, especially about information on the birth families, seemed more salient than contact to these children, for whom contact was not a feature of their lives. Furthermore, as with the children with contact, it seemed that for these children too the essential feature of family life was just belonging in a family.

Parents' perceptions of no contact in the context of family life

Sample

The nine sets of parents in this group, aged 33 to 51 years, were all married. Both partners attended and contributed to the interviews. The child of the youngest parents had been placed with them for two years, while the children of the oldest parents had been with them for nearly ten years, so these parents too were in their late thirties and early forties when they became adoptive parents. All were white, middle-class and English, except for one couple who were Scottish. All but one of the couples attended preparation groups arranged by their adoption agency.

Although these parents had no current contact, two families had been given letters from the birth mothers explaining why they had relinquished their babies. Early in the placement the adoptive mother from one family had sent a note of the baby's progress and some photographs to the birth mother, through the adoption team. One family had experienced the disruption of a previous adoptive placement, which had encompassed contact both problematic and beneficial.

Conceptualisation and questions

Data were gathered with the interview schedule (Appendix 7). Questions were mainly the same as for the contact group (leaving out those clearly not appropriate). The questions included: What does contact mean to you? Was contact suggested to you and what was your initial response? What do you think might be helpful about contact? What do you think you might not like or find unhelpful? How would it affect your child? Why would you do it? All were answered in a forthright way.

Findings: parents in families without contact

- Three of the families had experienced initial contact. In two the birth parents had lost contact and the adopters decided not to continue sending letters and photographs. The third family and their daughter when she was six decided to end contact because it was unreliable, inappropriate and detrimental to developing family relationships.
- Another family on their own initiative attempted contact but ended it because the letter was never collected, which upset their child with this further rejection. Their post-adoption worker supported this decision.
- Seven families had at least one photograph of the birth family. The photos varied from a single one of the adopted child's three older siblings, to numerous photographs of the paternal family but only one of the birth mother, taken when she met the adoptive mother.
- All the families had written information about the birth family in their child's Form E. This ranged from minimal information about the birth mother's physical appearance, to information sometimes about her personality and interests, but often with little or no information about the father.
- All of the families had requested photographs or additional photographs from the birth families through the social worker. These requests were unmet.

Tessa, mother of Sally (13), explained what she felt about contact:

What we did at first was put a letter and photograph each year on file, I think for the the first six or seven years, as you do, and then a couple of years running Sally had done pictures and things to send as well ... But we never knew whether Carol [birth mum] would ever read them ... We said [to Sally], Oh, we're sending them to put them on file in case. She didn't want to do them any more, she got to about seven and it wasn't what she wanted to do ... but I think it would have been nice perhaps if, if a yearly letter could have been exchanged.

Tessa illustrates the optimism, openness and efforts of most adoptive parents in both groups, who want to do what is best for their children. Like all the adoptive mothers she would have liked her daughter to have a photograph of her birth mother. With the passing of time she felt that sending information which was not collected or reciprocated was another form of rejection for her daughter. So she and her husband complied with their daughter's wish to stop sending it.

In one family with one child without contact, when a second child was placed her birth mother wished to send cards at birthdays and Christmas. But the family refused, as they felt this was 'unfair' on their other child. However, they sent information and photos to the birth mother, but these were never collected, so after three or four years the family stopped.

The experience of Betty, the mother of Ben (13), was shared by a few families. She explained the meaning of contact for them:

Some of our friends have contact and they get very emotional cards and letters from birth mother and it's very upsetting for them. I'm glad we have none, it's less complicated and confusing.

Her husband Len added,

I think it's better without it. I never wanted it and I'm glad we don't have it because of what we see from our friends.

Betty and Len were clearly relieved that they did not have this extra task of adoptive parenting. They understood the possible benefits of contact, but felt that the disadvantages outweighed them.

A typical example from this group is Kate, adoptive mother of two teenagers placed as young babies, who said,

It maybe a bit of jealousy because they're my children, but she is the birth mother ... Personally I'm glad we didn't have contact, but if they'd said you can only have this baby if you have contact, we would have had the baby, because you're desperate.

Kate and her husband were open and communicative with their children. She had shown empathy with and generosity to the birth mothers by sending them photographs and a letter about their baby's progress shortly after each was placed.

- Seven of the nine sets of adopters expressed relief that they did not have contact.
- One family quoted above felt it might have been helpful, particularly in obtaining a photograph of the birth mother for their son, as their adopted daughter had one of her birth mother.
- The adoptive father would have wanted only to receive contact from the birth parents, contrary to what he had just said, and in contrast to those families in the other group with only one-way contact who wished for reciprocation.
- He and his wife felt it was too late now and would be confusing for the children.

The exception was Tessa and Ken, parents of Sally (13) placed as a young baby. They would have liked to meet the birth mother and have some form of contact with her. Tessa had sent photographs and letters to be left on file for her until Sally asked her to stop. Sally is currently having therapy to help with identity issues and hopes to meet her birth mother sometime in the near future. It is difficult to say if their daughter's present difficulties are about her adoption or about teenage uncertainties of identity.

One family was less than comfortable when asked what their daughter Beth (14) understood about her background. Diana responded, 'Yeah, she knows she's adopted but then she forgets and that's nice ... We've not talked about it, to be honest ...' John added, 'Not for many years, no.' Diana continued, 'Because she didn't want to talk about it, we haven't.'

Diana and John were open and talked with me at length about their three children. They knew that Beth had memories about her background, some good, some detrimental. They did not want to open old wounds. They had received no group preparation to assist them with this difficult task (Triseliotis 2000, quoted in the identity section below).

This family had also experienced the disruption of a previous placement which had complex contact arrangements and included age-inappropriate information from an older sibling. So Diana and John had a number of reasons which contributed to their uncomfortableness with contact issues and explanations to their children. However, their children, and those of another less open family, said they could ask their parents about their background.

- One couple felt that the threat and mystery surrounding the birth mother had been removed by meeting her and was beneficial as they could give their daughter information and be able to describe the birth mother to Wendy.
- On the other hand they were disappointed that they had been unable to get any significant information from the birth mother; instead she had wanted to talk about matters unconnected with Wendy. However, they were glad to have had the opportunity of a meeting. This finding confirms those of Fratter (1996) and Triseliotis (2000).
- Seven of the adoptive mothers would like to have met the birth mothers of their children; one mother was unclear.
- All the adoptive mothers felt that their child's birth mother had loved their child who had been told this most salient fact, for their self-esteem. Triseliotis, (2000: 88).
- A few adoptive fathers were doubtful about this 'love'.

The families without contact presented much as those who did have contact. They were busy, involved parents enjoying family life. Overall they felt that their children were well-attached, happy and secure. One family of three adopted siblings were aware of their son's attachment difficulties (which were being addressed by professionals), but they felt that he thought he was 'happy, in his own way as happy as he possibly could be.' And they were fully committed to him. While appreciating the benefits of information and possible future links with the birth family, with which contact might have provided them and their children, most felt they were better off without it. The advantages of feeling like an ordinary family, without the

complexities of contact, and of feeling more in control, suited them best. These issues will be further explored in the discussion chapter.

Attachment in families with contact

Introduction

Adopted children, like all children, need physical comfort, stability, care, interest and love and to have their emotional needs met. These things promote attachment, and attachment lays the foundations for trust and lasting future relationships and for coping confidently with new situations (Bowlby 1969). It is fundamental to children's development, wellbeing and future mental health, and it is linked with their identity formation. Knowing that their adopters are responsive to these needs, and will continue to be so, develops children's trust and strengthens attachment (Triseliotis 2000: 92). But for many of the children in my sample the early caregiving responses for their development of attachment had been lacking.

Extra attachment tasks that need to be achieved by adopted children

The kind of early bond made in childhood, whether it is a secure or an anxious one, will have consequences for the future functioning of the individual. Since many of the children in my sample had anxious attachments, their integration and re-attachment to their new parents is the primary consideration. 'A failure to attach may be attributable to the quality of parenting, the child or both' (Triseliotis 2000: 83).

To examine if re-attachments have been achieved I shall report the findings in relation to the children's sense of their attachments in sections below on:

- security and belonging
- safety
- comfort with physical proximity
- food
- attention and stimulation
- education

Conceptualisation and questions to the children and parents

My conceptualisation of these children's feelings about, perceptions of and attitudes to their attachments derive from their answers during the interviews to the semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 7). The questions were about relating and affectionate relationships, security, confidence in abilities, and comfortableness with self and others. The questions included: How are you getting on in your family? Who do you turn to at times of upset, worry, or illness? How do you show affection, and are you a huggie family? How do your mum and dad show they care about you?

How do you show that you care about them? I explored particularly the children's feelings and experiences in relation to the attachment indicators listed above.

The parents questions generally mirrored the questions I asked their children, outlined above. The purpose was to elicit their sense of their child's comfortableness with giving and receiving affection. I also asked questions which would indicate if the children were confident, happy and attached, and had developed a conscience, for example, Does she make good eye contact? Is she a smiley girl? Can you trust her? My observations of family interaction are used to support the interview data.

Children with contact

Sample

The sample is described above in The meaning of contact in family life, and in Table 1.

Findings on attachment: children with contact

- All 13 of the children now considered themselves attached to their parents, siblings, extended family and friends.
- Attachment they told me was: how they get on with people, link with them, and love and care about them.
- The children made no connections between attachment and contact.

Security and sense of belonging

All of the children perceived themselves as secure and happy, with feelings of being loved and belonging in their families. According to Rutter (1990: 206) "A stable, long-term relationship with warm, loving and consistent caregivers is perhaps the most potent protective experience". The research design presented opportunities to observe the children and their parents interacting. In the children's interaction with me they showed themselves as confident, secure children who were relaxed and happy; they smiled, made good eye contact, and were confident enough to join the adults and make appropriate contributions to the conversation, but also left after a reasonable time or when their parents suggested this (Fahlberg 1994: 32). There was much humour and banter between parents and children, and occasional showing off or testing of limits, which was dealt with in a calm and positive manner and accepted by the children.

For example, Fiona presented as securely attached to her adoptive parents and her brother. She was clear in her responses to questions about what she had gained by being adopted and who her real parents now were – those who cared for her, provided a good home and upbringing, kept her safe and would always be there for her. Fiona was placed with her younger brother when she was nearly four years old because of their background of serious neglect. To illustrate her attachment to her adoptive parents she said, when interviewed at 14 years old:

I have a mum and dad ... it's kind of like a secure place to be. Instead of where I could have been.

This quote is typical highlighting and demonstrating the children's feelings of security and attachment with their adopters, and confirms my analysis from the transcripts, my observations, and the results from the checklist and relationship game, that they are now truly attached to their adoptive parents. These findings and the meaning of contact to their attachment are analysed and discussed in the contact section above and in the next chapter.

One exception was Chloe. Whilst she perceived herself as secure and belonging, her mother felt that she was often quite miserable and a somewhat 'stiff' child. When asked how her mum knew when she was upset, and how her mum and dad showed they care, Chloe responded:

Not really, because most days I just watch a bit of TV ... Not usually, sometimes I'm worried to tell her things and I don't feel confident. I don't know whether to tell her or not, sometimes I do tell her. Sometimes I phone up my friends ... They usually, like ... [Pause] My mum doesn't spend much time with me because she's busy with the housework and my dad's sleeping, but when they're not doing that they give us a hug, take us out ... I'm not that kind of huggy, but I'm not that kind of girl.

This quote shows a sad little girl, feeling that her mum did not notice when she was upset. A responsible job, following divorce, taking on Chloe's challenging younger sister and housework seemed to take precedence over quality time spent with Chloe. Other factors may be that Chloe felt labelled as unaffectionate, or that the personalities are not complementary (Howe et al 1999: 34).

Feeling safe

During the interviews the children talked about feeling safe and about belonging in their adoptive families. In contrast, often explicitly and sometimes implicitly, the children referred to their memories of lack of safety and security in their birth families. Most had experienced poverty, neglect and abuse. They had sometimes been left alone and were scared, or been left with carers who were unfamiliar and perhaps in some cases felt unsafe. The case histories of the children revealed that the birth parents often had sad and complex backgrounds, lived in discord, had psychiatric illnesses, or were misusing alcohol or drugs or both. This resulted in poor parenting and abuse and neglect of the children, who became fearful and insecurely attached (Howe et al. 1999: 119). Further factors responsible for insecure attachment and lack of trust included their remembered fear of noises such as the wind whistling; and because explanations and reassurances had not been given they had continued to be frightened of noises that most children come to understand. Many were afraid of parents shouting and of the sirens of police, ambulances and fire engines.

For example, Kate, aged nearly 16, placed aged nine, explained how she used to be insecure, upset and afraid. Nowadays she feels different with her new family:

Just having a better relationship, a better family relationship, no more worrying, no more getting put in foster care, so just better and closer than my birth mum ... We all like to spend loads of time with each other ... When I was living with my birth mum I was quite scared a lot, now I'm here I just feel secure and safe and loved and everything, about what's going on.

Bowlby advocated on behalf of children, for skilled help to be given to parents before and after the birth of their child and during the child's early years to help them develop the affectionate and understanding relationships that most of them wish to have with their baby. This is the right time '...at which to tackle the malign circle of disturbed children growing up to become disturbed parents who in turn handle their children in such a way that the next generation develops the same or similar troubles' (Bowlby 1979: 20).

Comfortableness with physical proximity

All of the children described the physical closeness they experienced with their adoptive parents and the ease and naturalness of this. This had not always been the case for many of them. Robert, now aged ten and placed at two, when asked

what it was like when he first came to live with his family, illustrated his early mistrust:

I was only two, I didn't go for hugs because I didn't know nobody there ... I didn't know what was going on ... [Now] when I'm upset I have a hug or I read to them and it makes me happy when I'm reading [on the sofa between mum and dad] or having a hug.

His case history revealed that Robert's only attachment figure had been his sister. He had not bonded with his foster carers or in his birth family. He explained to me that his adoptive mum used to say to him, 'I need a hug'. This little boy had made great progress: he was observed being comfortable with physical closeness to his parents and siblings. His parents helped him with regression (Francis et al. 1992: 45). They also encouraged closeness and thus attachment by means of everyday things such as brushing his hair, buying new clothes and reading to him (Fahlberg 1988).

Food

Food was a common theme with the children. Its link with early careseeking and caregiving is salient in this context (see the attachment chapter). Most talked about their mum's cooking and about being taught to cook by her. The children had often missed out on these early necessary, nurturing, and pleasurable experiences of food. They viewed food as one of the ways in which their mother showed her care. Showing care for their parents, included making their mum and dad cups of tea and coffee, sometimes breakfast and sometimes supper, often shepherd's pie. They enjoyed describing their favourite foods, often chocolate cake and spaghetti bolognese. As with many children, some disliked vegetables and some enjoyed them. Being deprived of food, was remembered or that it was not a regular or sometimes appropriate feature in their birth parents' home lives. So it was particularly relished and appreciated within their adoptive families. Buns or biscuits, cooked by the children, were often offered with tea on my arrival or later in the interview. This social interaction gave further opportunities for discussion and observation, helping us feel at ease.

Stimulation and attention

All of the children in the group exemplified the stimulation and attention, praise and encouragement given by their parents. One example, typical of the group, is Robert:

[Mum] lets us do cooking sometimes, burgers, chips and things and spahgetti, quiches and biscuits and buns, I like baking those and flapjacks ... em they do things for you, make things. We go out together. We go to museums or go for a meal or just go to the park or Whitby or Scarborough on the seaside... We do a lot more things, swimming. I read to them... and they say well done Robert or smile at me. They help me with my work and things.

Education

Education and its ancillary activities form a large part of children's and parents' everyday lives. Parents' interest in and encouragement of their children's homework, projects and afterschool clubs and outings are part of attachment building (Fahlberg 1988). Children who feel positive about education and are enjoying school generally reflect good self-esteem and confidence. All of the children and their parents felt pleased and positive about their educational progress from the child in special education, the children with borderline special needs, the average, above average and the children who were in the gifted groups. All the children were able to concentrate on their schoolwork and enjoy it, and this reflects good attachment (Fahlberg 1988, Triseliotis et al.1997, Triseliotis 2000).

A prevailing attitude demonstrating attachment (Fahlberg 1988: 65) was that parents were interested, encouraged them with homework and projects, and praised their efforts. When the children made mistakes it was viewed as something everyone does sometimes and learns from. All the children chatted about schoolfriends and the interests they shared with them, such as afterschool clubs and other pursuits in the community. During the relationship game their schoolfriends and teachers usually appeared in the circle for people they liked. A few children placed a teacher or another pupil in the disliked or unhappy-with circles.

The children's secure attachments were personified by: their comfortableness with physical contact; warmth and enthusiasm; openness and meaningful engagement; good self-esteem; close sustained friendships; feeling worthwhile and loveable; appropriate smiles and eye contact (Karen 1994: 445).

Parents in families with contact

Findings on attachment: parents in families with contact

The parents were honest, voluble and forthright in answering the attachment questions, and told the story of their children's relationship with them, as it was

when they were first placed and how it had progressed to the present day. Often there were tears when they described their children's background and history of abuse and neglect, which had resulted in the children being withdrawn, angry, destructive, mistrustful and generally insecure. Consequently the children's initial behaviour in the family was often distressing and disruptive. As described later, many of the children took years to become secure and comfortable with themselves and others. There were also tears of happiness when the parents expressed their joy at being a family after years of waiting and their pleasure at how well the children had progressed. All the parents indicated their commitment and emotional responsiveness, verifying their attachment.

- As with their children, all the parents with contact were attached to their children,
- One mother described her child as unhappy but secure and belonging.
- Only one made a link between contact and attachment. This is discussed in the following chapter.

Early insecure attachments

The majority of the parents had older children from abusive backgrounds placed with them. An example of early insecure attachment was given by the parents of Robert. They had been aware of his early attachment difficulties, and his birth mother's emotional insecurity. Robert's adoptive mother Liz demonstrated her understanding by explaining:

All his life he'd been moved; even with the birth family he'd been moved a lot, never built up any love or trust with anyone. I think it [his life] had been troubled even then, how he didn't get enough consistency, care, food ... He's a different person now ... He can get low. But on the whole he is happy, very caring, very helpful. He's got a real nice side to him. He can also be noisy, rowdy and selfish, challenging.

This is typical of the feelings and experiences of the majority of the parents. They commonly explained how the children tried to repeat their early experiences; the patterns of chaos, lack of routine for bedtimes and meals, little affection, and inappropriate or withdrawn behaviour. The adoptive parents reparented their children promoting security and trust through nurturing, safe and consistent parenting, routines and so on. In other words they became attached. The children

now had a secure base having experienced 'a balanced and flexible use of caregiving behaviour' (Howe et al. 1999: 42).

In contrast, three sets of adoptive parents who had young infants placed with them found that their children settled quickly and easily. They had been relinquished or removed from their birth parents at an early age and had not experienced abuse or neglect. They had made good attachments in foster care and went on with the help of the foster carers to transfer and build on these with their adoptive parents (Fahlberg 1994).

Secure attachment

All of the parents felt that their children were now well-attached, secure children who felt they belonged and were enjoying life, just as they as parents were enjoying being parents. There was also a strong sense of entitlement, and they reciprocated their children's feelings of belonging. These expressions of secure attachment echoed their children's answers. These were further confirmed by observations of the parents' interactions with their children: affectionate looks passed between them, and the way they wished them goodnight, followed by kisses and hugs.

One exception was Chloe's mother Dinah. Whilst loving Chloe and being totally committed to her, Dinah described her as miserable and unhappy much of the time, and always looking on the black side. 'But she will tell you she's happy because she thinks she is happy, and I think that's as happy as she gets.' Dinah was somewhat ambivalent about her daughter, and confused about these different aspects of Chloe's personality.

Parents perceptions of their children's growing attachments

The parents were in accord with their children in their responses to the questions about: security and belonging; safety; physical proximity; food; education; attention and stimulation. There was a sense of congruence and complementariness between the children's and parents' answers. Parents told their stories of their children's growing development and attachments, which progressed from sad to joyful as they realised how much their children had 'come on'. I began to reflect on the children's sense of their attachments, wondering, were they merely echoing their parents' positive accounts? This was clearly not the case for the majority. However, the two youngest (both six), did repeat some of their parents' words; this is in accordance with their age and understanding of adoption (Brodzinsky 1984).

But the older children had their own stories to tell, which exemplified their openness, their confidence in themselves and their ability to engage in meaningful exchanges.

Una, mother of eight-year-old Dori, exemplifies the ups and downs and the development of attachment experienced by the caregivers of the older-placed children:

And she would be so angry, but then she was matching me against her old mum because mums can't be trusted as far as she was concerned. Foster mums can but permanent mums can't ... From the moment she got up, she just wouldn't do anything you say, she was really violent, she'd hit me, kick, bite, spit, throw things, oh just, it was awful ... But I would never have sent her anywhere else, she was staying here forever ... She still gets angry, but nothing like she did, at all. She's just so polite, and lovely, and we have really good fun, and – oh, she's just completely mine. Ever so close now, people say, she's just you.

Una understood Dori's aggressive behaviour as a consequence of her early experiences and addressed her anxious attachment with calm safekeeping measures and nurturing caregiving (Fahlberg 1988: 344). Within a year their attachment had progressed as described above.

Attachment in families with no contact

Children with no contact

Sample

The sample is the same as in the Meaning of Contact section and in Table 3.

Conceptualisation and questions

The questions and conceptualisation are the same as in the contact group.

Findings on attachment:

- All these 12 children, in common with the children with contact, perceived themselves as attached to their adoptive parents, siblings, extended family and friends.
- These children, in their responses to the questions and in the relationship game, demonstrated their attachments by their clear enjoyment of life, their reflection of love for and from their parents, and their strong sense of belonging in their families.
- They were happy, confident, delightful children. Their attachment was exemplified by: their liking for themselves; their awareness of their good and bad points; making good eye contact; trying new tasks; their ability to express emotions; by their enjoyment of physical closeness to parents (Fahlberg 1988).
- None of these children apart from one made any connection between their attachments and contact. This will be explored in the next chapter.

One example of good attachment is in the simple, matter-of-fact, clear, innocent way in which Nat, placed as an 18-week-old relinquished baby and interviewed when he was ten, described family life:

OK really, we all get on. I like how we all get on, and holidays, and they look after us ... They care about us, give us hugs and things.

The one exception was Oliver, who perceived himself as attached, although his parents and sisters and the professionals involved with him did not agree that he was. Oliver had a complex history of emotional and sexual abuse and neglect. Placed at three and interviewed aged 13, Oliver described how he was getting on with his family:

I think I'm getting on fine. I enjoy it. It's good ... They go and buy us sweets and stuff. I get on alright sometimes but then she'll [his favourite sister] always get in a mood and start calling me names and stuff, and then she'll start saying I've done stuff I haven't ... She'll go to dad and say horrible stuff about me ...

Asked how his parents show they care, he said, 'I can't remember.' Asked if they were a huggy family he responded with: 'We don't do that often.' This did not correspond with Oliver's sisters' responses to the same questions. Oliver made eye contact with me intermittently and when he did was uneasy and quickly glanced away. He did not smile or seem as relaxed and at ease as the other children. His fidgeting and diversionary tactics, when asked the more profound questions about what he knew of his background and whether there were things he still wondered about, were indicators of his insecure attachment. Other children were at ease with me and able to answer these harder questions more fully and comfortably. In my view Oliver, although an intelligent and able boy, was not securely attached (Crittenden 1995: 379).

Security and sense of belonging

All these children, like those with contact, considered themselves happy and securely attached to their parents and siblings. Those placed as babies, although aware of their origins, felt they had always been with their adoptive parents and were comfortable about belonging in their family. Many of the later-placed children, who had taken years to settle, had become attached, and had come to share similar feelings to those of the children placed as babies. As well as expressing these feelings during the interviews the children also illustrated them by their close, comfortable and confident interactions with their parents.

One example of the feeling of security and belonging comes from Beth, now 14, placed at age four because of neglect and abuse in her birth family; she said:

It just feels like I've always been here ... It just feels like I've been here all the time ... Like when I've got problems I can always go to them and talk to them about them and stuff like that.

Safety

It was common for the six children interviewed who had been placed as babies not to mention safety as much as the later-placed children. All the children felt safe. For example, Keelan who was placed as an eleven-week-old baby, now aged eleven, said he felt safe and this concern of his parents showed they cared about him.

For the six later-placed children, safety was more prevalent in their narratives, probably because of their experiences of abuse and neglect. As with the contact group, their birth parents had problems with mental health, drug misuse and social deprivation. Daisy's feelings about safety are characteristic of the other children who had also felt unsafe with their birth parents. Daisy, placed at four and now seven, was a child who knew no fear, approached strangers, ran into the road, climbed and explored dangerous objects, and had no routines nor boundaries; she explains:

I can't tell Mandy where I live as Mummy said our family might go in danger ... Cos you know Vince's kind of rough, isn't he, a lot ... Cos Mandy didn't look after us and she didn't feed us properly, she didn't wash us properly ... She was only a teenager and teenagers need their life before they do have a baby anyway. We, Mandy didn't get any fun.

Comfortableness with physical proximity

It was common for the majority of the children to talk about cuddling up to their mum and dad on the sofa when they felt they needed to. The children were generally relaxed, with a sense of comfortableness between themselves and their parents which included the physical closeness.

Trinnie, now twelve and placed at three because of neglect, explained her physical closeness to her mum:

I go to my mum mostly, try to get her on her own, sit with her and she'll turn to ask me what's up with me and I'll tell her. My mum will just sit with me ... all the time. They're always really nice and they say they love me, give me hugs.

Food

For this group of children, food also was one of the ways in which their parents showed they cared about them. Food and eating were commonly mentioned. They liked their mum's cooking, helping her, and learning to cook themselves. Eating together around the table was often remarked on. Lizzie, the six-year-old sister of Daisy, had been placed at nearly three. She and her older sister had never before eaten around a table and initially found this experience very difficult in their new family. They had been fed irregularly, and as babies were given inappropriate takeaway food. Lizzie's response to being asked what she liked about being in her family was common to many of the children, demonstrating both pleasure and difficulty in sharing food.

The cooking. Mum normally cooks for my birthday, spaghetti bolognese cos that's my favourite ... I really like it cos we have this cheese, special cheese that makes it delicious ... Parmesan ... I gave dad one bun ... then mummy said I have to share both and it was horrible, but I had to share the last two, cos I didn't have many.

Stimulation and attention

These children, like those with contact, talked about their experiences of the attention, encouragement and stimulation they received from and shared with their parents in leisure and school activities.

Laura, now eighteen, described the kind of attention, interest and encouragement she got from her parents early on in the placement and more recently. She personifies the way she and many other children in the sample, with responsive, positive caregiving of her adopters transformed her negative IWM to a positive one. Clearly she feels lovable, of interest and worthy, saying:

I suppose the love and attention I got off my mum cos ... Like, I didn't seem to get that much attention from Michelle [birth mum], but like, when I moved in here I got pretty dresses, and I aren't saying it because of that but I got treat like a proper daughter, I got attention, mum played with me and did my hair and got me dolls and like, did a proper mother and daughter relationship. When I was with Michelle she'd watch TV all day or she'd eat or drink or whatever ... Mum joins in and things now ... Dad's turned round and said to me, if I want to be in the air force I've got to do well ... And I've done it so I've got in. Dad's over the moon, Mum was as well.

Education

Again, as in the contact group, all the children described themselves as enjoying school, doing fine and being supported by parents, teachers and peers.

For example, Ben, nearly 13, illustrated his enjoyment of school and how his mum's encouragement and praise has helped him gain confidence, self-esteem and the ability to help himself:

I like the way you have to move round classrooms all the time, which is fun, and a different range of teachers, cos all the tech teachers are real nice, cos I enjoy having a nice teacher and I like teachers that teach you a lot in a fun way. So we actually do try and learn ... On the fridge there [pointing] I've got all my certificates ... and my mum said, I'm really proud, could you do that again and I'll treat you to something. I'm not very good at French and my mum says, we're gonna do a little bit more homework and try and get you a better mark, and it's just, like, an extra halfhour. I'm not a very good speller and mum asked if there was anything we could do, and next day I went to a spelling class and I didn't feel embarrassed going to it cos I knew I wasn't very good, and it did help.

Parents in families with no contact

Sample

The sample is the same as in The meaning of contact.

Conceptualisation and questions

These are the same as in the group with contact.

Findings on attachment:

- There are striking similarities between the parents in the no-contact and contact groups; the same was found with the children
- All considered themselves attached to their children.
- Similarly to the other group, none of these parents made any connections between their attachments and contact.

This analysis is based on their responses to the interview questions, and by my observations of their attachment behaviour, knowledge of their children and belief that they would turn out fine. (Fahlberg 1988).

The exception to being securely attached was Oliver. His mum Diana, described and demonstrated good attachments to Oliver's siblings. She clearly loved and was committed to Oliver, and able to accept his anxious attachment. His anxious attachment behaviour is clearly described as:

Oliver, I feel, has never bonded in all the time, he's never given, there's always been that distance and I think that's the way he was, he's happy in that distance, he finds it hard ... Very clingy, very quick to call you daddy and mummy, and loves and kisses, do you know what I mean, they were false, still the same ... He doesn't show any emotion, never has. He's happy when he's destroying. He'll laugh about stupid things ... anything, animals getting hurt or people, he takes pleasure. He can't be trusted ... and his eyes are off [he doesn't make eye contact]. We got asked once if we wanted to give him up and, oh God, my stomach churned, I couldn't believe it. Oh no, my first instinct, no, you know, really, really strange.

Oliver was the opposite of the other children in the group. During his interview and the relationship game he rarely smiled, did not make good eye contact, was fidgety and not at ease. He presented as charming and confident, then needy and insecure. Probably because of his early experiences of abuse and neglect he has never been able to trust adults (Howe et al. 1999). Post-adoption support ten years ago was not readily available. His parents struggled on and his adoptive dad became distanced from him, as possibly demonstrating a coping mechanism, which may have exacerbated Oliver's anxious attachment (Main 1995: 455). This will be examined further in the following chapter.

Teaching early developmental tasks to older-placed children

Most parents in both groups found that their children had missed out on early developmental tasks, of talking, feeding themselves, learning numbers, singing nursery rhymes, learning to read, and having fun, as Daisy pointed out above. Some of the older children had not learned to swim, or had never been away on a holiday or splashed through puddles or taken a dog for a walk. The parents were pleased to be the first to teach and encourage these experiences, share them with their children and praise their efforts. In the process of careseeking and caregiving

the children's skills developed along with age-appropriate independence, bonding and security. Hodges and Tizard (1989: 95) support this finding; they found that adopters 'spent more time playing with their children, spent more time with them in "educative" pursuits and involved them more in joint household activities', than either the biological parents of 'restored' children or, indeed, other middleclass parents of non-adopted children.

Baby placements: early attachment

The parents of the eight children placed as babies described how their children began to bond with them at the foster carers' and settled and became securely attached early in their placements. This finding is similar to the findings of Grotevant and McRoy (1998), Triseliotis et al. (1997) and Neil (2004).

Achievement of the extra tasks of attachment

In common with the contact group, these parents stressed the importance to them of their own and their children's feelings of security and belonging. They also shared a feeling of entitlement to their children and that they are now the real parents. The parents in this group, like those with contact, gave voluble answers to my questions. Their children's answers echoed the parents but tended to be shorter. There was no sense of collusion or needing to be in agreement with their parents. They were just complementary in telling how they viewed their lives. The parents showed their secure attachments to their children through their responses to the questions on comfort with physical proximity, food, education, stimulation and attention, and so on. Their caregiving responses over time had in all cases except Oliver's promoted their children's secure attachments. This theme will be explored in the next chapter.

Identity

Introduction

Identity formation, like attachment, is fundamental to an infant's and child's development, wellbeing and future mental health. Triseliotis (2000: 92) informs us that studies of the identity formation of adopted people suggest that during early childhood the overriding developmental consideration that contributes to the core of identity formation is the quality of children's relationships with and attachments to their primary carer(s). This is particularly important for adoptive parents and children who have additional tasks to carry out in constructing the children's identity.

Extra tasks that need to be achieved by adoptive children

- According to Triseliotis there are three extra tasks that adoptive children need to achieve for the formation of their identity.
- First, they need to make new attachments to their adoptive parents.
- Secondly, they need to integrate their developing selfknowledge of being adopted, which in turn involves:
 - a) awareness of being adopted and the gradual understanding of its meaning and implications;
 - b) awareness of one's ancestry and, where relevant, one's ethnic heritage;
 - c) including, where desired, face-to-face contact;
 - d) the acknowledgement of the difference between psychosocial and biological parenting and, where relevant, the acknowledgement of one's ethnic and/or racial heritage and difference;
 - e) dealing with the sense of loss and rejection that adoption inevitably conveys. Thirdly, they need to achieve the formation of an identity that is based on a positive resolution of the above attributes (Triseliotis 2000: 82).

I will report the findings in relation to the second main aim of identity formation, integrating into the developing self the knowledge of being adopted, which involves the five tasks (a) to (e) above.

Children with contact

Sample

The sample is described above in The meaning of contact in family life, and in Table 1.

Conceptualisation and questions

My data were based on the children's answers to the semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 7) and the Who Do You ... identity game (Appendix 10). Beforehand the children were asked what they understood by identity; most answered that it was about who I am, about identifying me. Questions included: Some children are happy with the way they look, and other children are not so happy; what about you? How would you describe your personality? How would your parents describe your personality or character? What do you know and understand about your background? Do you know why your birth mum was unable to look after you? Who do you look like and act like? The questions for both groups were identical, with the parents' questions mirroring their children's.

Findings on identity: children with contact

(a) Awareness of being adopted and the gradual understanding of its meaning and implications

- All 13 children were aware of their adoptive status.
- In accordance with Brodzinsky's Levels of Understanding (Brodzinsky 1984), three children who were six years old at interview clearly knew they were adopted but did not understand the full implications of not being born into their adoptive family.
- Nine children were over eight and one was nearly eight, all understood the additional implications of being adopted.

Kyle (9) was representative of the other eight- to ten-year-olds in the group. Like some of the other children, Kyle did not yet know his full story, but his adopters, like the others, were gradually unfolding it according to the children's age and understanding. Kyle demonstrated during his interview his awareness of being adopted and his gradual understanding of its meaning and implications:

Well, I thought I was the only person who has been adopted for a long time, but I'm not. I didn't use to know what adopted meant but ... it means that someone who, your real mum who couldn't take care of you, and they give you to someone else to be adopted ... I only knew she [adoptive mum] was writing letters about three years ago ... I wrote about what I like and everything.

- The three teenagers had a fuller understanding of their adoption, such as its legal aspects and the difficult reasons why they had needed adopting.
- They had been placed at ages between five and nine and had clear memories of the abuse they had experienced.
- In response to my question about why they could not live with their birth parents, they succinctly told me why.

All the children were able to ask their adoptive parents questions about their adoption, but with varying degrees of comfort, just as their parents varied in the timing of their explaining and telling. These findings will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

(b) Awareness of one's ancestry and, where relevant, of one's ethnic heritage

- All the children were aware that they had another family, their original biological parents, whom they referred to as birth or tummy mum and dad and sometimes by a first name.
- All were of white English heritage, and their adopters shared the same heritage. While understanding comes at a later stage, awareness of the original family needs to begin early. Practice wisdom and the studies of Howe and Feast (2000) and Triseliotis (2000) show that children who have 'always known' are more comfortable, and that their adopters are more open and also more comfortable with talking to their children about their other family, the birth family.

Trinnie (10), characteristic of her group, talked openly about identity and her birth family; she also included in the identity game the fact that she had inherited her musical talent from her 'tummy daddy'. Trinnie explained some of the physical aspects of her identity, and demonstrated her growing understanding about adoption:

I look like my birth mum cos I've got her skin, eyes and hair ... I've never heard my birth mum [speak] so I don't know if I'm more like her or more like my mum now ... She [the birth mum] was trying to look after us, but she didn't do it very well.

This understanding will be further discussed in the following chapter.

(c) Having access to genealogical, ethnic and other related information, including, where desired, face-to-face contact

- All the children were able to access genealogical information by asking their parents about why their birth family could not look after them, what kind of people they were, and what they looked like.
- Genealogical information was available from their lifestory books and forms, and sometimes from photographs and letters from the birth parents.
- The children who had face-to-face contact with members of their birth family were also able to recognise physical and personality likenesses in their parents, siblings or grandmother, and sometimes other questions were answered for them.
- Six children did not have any face-to-face contact (only one child had face-to-face contact with her birth parents), but felt that their parents would support them in having a meeting with their birth mother sometime in the future when it felt appropriate.
- Two teenage siblings had met their birth father, and the girl (the elder) was due to meet her birth mother after the completion of her GCSEs later in the spring. Her brother planned to, but was not yet ready for such a meeting.

Fourteen-year-old Fiona was representative of the group, especially of the teenagers. All the children had similar experiences of being given physical and verbal information about their birth families, which answered their 'who', 'why' and 'what' questions and their curiosity about their birth parents and background. Also characteristic of the group was Fiona's confidence in the trust and support that she would receive from her adoptive parents when she was ready to meet her birth mother. She says,

She's always been very upfront. But, yeh, my mum has always answered any questions that I've had, and stuff like that ... My mum's told me stuff, everything that she knows. But of course I want to know more ... My mum

and dad have always said they'll help me [to meet my birth mum] ... My mum has always said she doesn't want me to go behind her back ... I suppose she wants to know her as well.

These issues will be further explored in the following chapter.

(d) The acknowledgement of the difference between psychosocial and biological parenting and, where relevant, the acknowledgement of one's ethnic and/or racial heritage and difference

The importance of adoptive parents acknowledging the differences between biological and psychosocial parenting, was recognised by Kirk (1964). Adopted children also need to surmount this hurdle by recognising rather than denying the importance and existence of biological parents.

- None of the children in this group were overly preoccupied with curiosity about their birth parents,
- Neither were they in denial of their origins. This is evident from the above sections.
- The children thought of their adoptive parents as their 'real' everyday parents who looked after them, shared interests with them, disciplined them, and loved them, and with whom they belonged.
- They felt they took after their adopters in looks, personality and in some of the talents that they had acquired.
- From their completion of the identity game all but the four youngest children in the group considered their birth parents also to have contributed to their personalities, looks and talents.

Kate, who was nearly sixteen when interviewed, discussed both of her families in depth. She considers her adoptive mother to be the mum whom she relates to, has grown to behave and look like and with whom she belongs. However, she recognises the looks and characteristics that she has inherited from her birth family, and plans to meet her birth mother, as she has questions to ask.

More my dad I think, seeing a picture of him, I think I look more like him ...
Nature versus nurture ... Mm, it's personality, characteristics and speech.

What Kate was trying to explain, which is both implicit and explicit in her narrative, was her acceptance of, though sometimes also her concern about, the influence and

possible inheritance of some traits from her birth parents. But she knew that her adoptive family was her 'real' family now. As with the other aspects of attachment and contact, the interest in the biological family may change over time. These issues will be further discussed in the next chapter.

(e) Dealing with the sense of loss and rejection that adoption inevitably conveys

There is a sense of loss for the three main parties in adoption.

- The child has lost her or his original family
- Infertile adopters have lost the children whom they had hoped to have
- The birth parents have lost their child, occasionally through relinquishment but nowadays mainly by the decision of a court

Loss can raise anxiety about earlier and future losses. The sense of loss, and the understanding that adoption is about being given away by one's birth mother, can arouse a sense of rejection which in turn may be detrimental to the child's self-esteem and self-worth. Adopted children may worry about their birth parents, and having contact can reassure them that the birth parents are still alive and interested in them. This in turn may benefit their self-esteem and reassure them that they are worthy after all (Triseliotis et al. 1997).

- All the children seem to have dealt with or to have had the strength to deal with any feelings of loss and rejection which they may have experienced.
- The positive influence of having dealt with the other hurdles of identity formation, referred to above, may have helped them overcome some of the loss and rejection.

Triseliotis (2000: 88) found that 'studies so far are uncertain about what exactly is being mourned and how, and about its exact impact.' However, he concludes that studies found that some but not all feelings of loss and rejection could be healed by good adoptive experiences in an environment of security and empathy. His conclusion is supported by these findings, and this will be discussed further in the next chapter.

So all the children, with one exception (to a lesser degree), have successfully formed a positive sense of their identity; they have been able to meet Triseliotis' criteria for identity formation in the five sections above, carrying out the psychological tasks required and getting the information they need.

Physical, social and psychological identity

Other aspects of the children's sense of identity were also examined, including: how they felt about their physical looks and their personalities; their awareness of how others saw them; their perceptions of acceptance in the community; their development of a conscience; their views of their educational progress and ability to make relationships. Some of these aspects of the children's identity formation overlap and are interwoven with their attachments and contact and are also addressed in these sections.

Tom, interviewed at six and placed at 18 months, was typical also of the older group members who all have a positive sense of their identity. Tom's adoptive mother sends an annual newsletter to Tom's birth parents, which is not reciprocated. They have twice-a-year reciprocal news from Tom's birth sister placed in foster care. Tom responded to the identity questions about his sense of himself and what he thought his parents' answers to me were about his looks and personality, saying:

I'm so happy [with how I look]. My hair's a nice colour [auburn].

Asked what he thought his parents would have told me about him, he thought they would have said he looked nice. He added:

I'm friendly, not shy, happy and smiley and sad ... I'd like to be a bigger boy, going to school on my own ... when I'm in about class six.

- All the children except Chloe (to a lesser degree) had a realistic but positive sense of their own personalities.
- Without exception the children demonstrated awareness of their personalities and their parents' views of them, and demonstrated their acceptance in the community, their sense of right and wrong, and their empathy for others. These findings will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

The exception in the group was Chloe, interviewed at age 10, whose sense of identity was somewhat insecure. Chloe was placed with her adopters when she was one year old. Her adoptive mother sends a letter of information and photographs annually to her birth parents and grandparents. Chloe responded to the identity questions with:

I see some people at school who look really nice and I look at myself and I think I'm really ugly ... Everybody says that [I'm beautiful] but I just don't feel happy with it. I am a bit naughty sometimes, a bit cheeky and I make quite a lot of the arguments start. On the good side I'm funny and nice sometimes, I can smile and have a laugh, just depends. Sometimes I waken up in a good mood and sometimes bad if I know it's going to be boring and it's a Saturday and we're staying home all day. But mostly good ... I'm the maths queen ... I was the first to get a hundred out of 100%. The teacher gave me a treat as well as mum.

Clearly, Chloe who is a beautiful and academically gifted child with a sad aura, has a positive and negative and inaccurate sense of herself, which is confirmed by her adoptive mother in the parents' section below. Chloe's adoptive dad left his family two years before, which she she was unhappy about, although pleased the arguments had stopped. This unhappiness, and her possible worry that she may be responsible for her dad leaving (if she was less argumentative and moody, or prettier, would her dad have stayed?), may have affected her sense of identity. However, it may be that Chloe has always been somewhat insecure. Also her younger sister, who is a very challenging little girl, joined the family three years ago, usurping her place as the youngest and taking much of their mother's attention. Chloe's adoptive mum confirms that this has led to some of Chloe's insecurity. Chloe's case is examined further in the following chapter.

While the children had a positive sense of themselves, at the same time they were honest and realistic: they knew their vulnerabilities as well as their strengths. They considered themselves to be worthy, responsible and confident, and so their selfesteem was good. They were fluid in their sense of identity, considering it to be gleaned from their adoptive and birth parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, siblings – both biological and non-biological, from friends and teachers, and sometimes just from themselves. In the main they considered that some of their identity had been inherited and that it had evolved from both their birth and adoptive parents, and siblings both related and unrelated, including siblings born to their adopters.

Therefore, all but one of the children had a good sense of identity in the group with contact. They had all fulfilled the extra psychological tasks of integrating the pieces of knowledge they had gained from their adopters, and had gradually come to

understand the meanings of adoption, as they needed to do. All of them, though one less so than the others, had a positive perception of their social, physical and additional psychological identity. These achievements are complex and profound; they make use of experiences and perceptions of past, present and future to process, and to combine from two families and other sources, all these accumulated layers of information, to help form a positive identity. The majority of the children (8) had been in placement for between seven and ten years, three for between five and six years, one for two years and one for just over a year. Could it be hypothesised that contact in the context of family relationships has helped these children gain a better sense of their identity than those without contact? This will be discussed in the following chapter.

Parents in families with contact

The parents at the invitation of the children looked over and gave their comments on the identity game Who do you ... (Appendix10), and their children's answers. Sometimes the parents reminded them that grandpa too was musical like them or that their birth father was a good footballer, and so on; the children in every case agreed with this. All the parents understood the concept of identity and the fact that knowledge of their birth family was important for their children. Contact may provide some of this information now or in the future and benefit the children and their adopters accordingly. I took into consideration the findings in the attachment section, that they had also made a good job of providing a secure environment within a warm and caring relationship in the family; the children felt loved and wanted and were thus enabled to build their self-esteem and self-efficacy, becoming capable, responsible and contented children and young people.

Findings on identity: parents in families with contact

- All but one of the parents described their children as having a good sense of identity.
- All seemed comfortable to talk with their children about their past and to add information appropriate to their age and past experiences, as shown by the children's narratives above and my impressions of the children.

This acceptance of their children's birth family should promote their sense of identity as well as attachment (Triseliotis 2000). They were keen to narrate how over the years since their placement, with nurturing and information and explanations, their children had grown in self-esteem, self-worth and self-reliance, all factors which relate

to their identity formation as well as to their attachment. Some of the children had come to them insecure and sad, with low self-esteem, withdrawn, developmentally delayed and with a poor sense of themselves. Even though preparation work for adoption had been carried out by their social workers and foster carers the children often did not then know or understand why they were there, whether they were staying or moving on again, what had happened to their birth parents, or who exactly they themselves were. With the growth of trust, with care, praise, attention, interest and boundaries, and with coming to know that they belonged in this family, the children now knew themselves and were happy with who they were. They were becoming confident and self-reliant, and at the same time could appropriately depend on their parents for comfort, for advice on problems with school or friends, and for information about their background.

- However, for half of the ten families with contact the information and photographs which they sent to the birth families were not generally reciprocated.
- Though two of the families had received one or two letters from the birth mother or father near the beginning of the placement, these had tailed off.
- Therefore the information was often quite old, consisting of old letters, what was written in the form E, and supplemented by the social worker and information given verbally by the foster carer if she had had meetings with the birth parents.

The whole group of parents wanted to do their best for their children by gaining as much information about their backgrounds as possible and presenting it in an honest and age-appropriate way. They also found positives about the birth parents, told the children of these, and told them that they had fought for their children through the courts (if this was the case), which would help the children to feel worthy and wanted by their original family. They wanted to have and give information to help with their children's identity formation.

Some parents had to address the issue of their child's rejection by the birth parents. Most had to tackle background issues of serious neglect and abuse in an ongoing age-appropriate way. These families were consulting with their worker and using the book by Melina (1989), which explicitly advises parents on how best to give difficult explanations about incest, sexual and physical abuse, rejection, and so on. One of the questions asked of the parents was whether they felt that some information should be left out until later or forever. All were very clear that the

children would need to know the difficult facts of their background. They felt that even formidable information should be given sensitively to the children, and that they should be told by them, and not perhaps find out from strangers or from newspaper or other reports. However, one or two were hesitant and admitted to not yet using opportunities to address this issue.

Nell, the mother of two teenagers, reflected the general feelings and open attitudes in the group that her children had each become their own person and were aware of the different facets of their identity. She described her 16-year-old daughter Kate as:

Very much like her dad. I haven't met her birth mum yet but she's got a look of her, I think ... She's OK about everything like that ... Little bits of memories come back to her and she can talk about it. And there are sometimes things happening in programmes on the TV that'll upset both of them. Maybe a child who hasn't been wanted and that kind of thing ... She [Kate] put an album together with some of the old photographs in with her birth mum ... So they do have things ... I'm sure deep down, I'm sure they would think that she loved them ... One of the things she used to say when she used to get upset and she was calming down, was that she was frightened of getting old and being like her birth mum, you know, and, but I think she's growing out of it. I think she's seeing herself as her own person, and I think trying to get a sense of herself more, and I think because she's having to make all the decisions about what she's going to do next year [in the sixth form].

Nell demonstrates the opportunities parents use to talk about the past, present and future in relation to their children's identity.

Nell and another family have court orders for contact. Neither of the mothers, who mirror four of the other women in the group, seem to have any resentful feelings about having contact in general or about the existence of the court order. These two families along with three others also have direct contact, one with a maternal grandmother and the others with siblings. All arrange the contact independently, so they feel in control. It may also be that actually seeing family members explicitly assists in identity formation. Parents and children remarked in their interviews and in the relationship game about the resemblances between them and their siblings and grandmother. The sum of all these factors may be less than the whole in the

sense of identity for the parents and their children. One could hypothesise that direct contact may be more beneficial to the children in shaping their identity. This will be explored further in the group without contact and in the following chapter.

Dinah, the mother of Chloe had difficulty making or perhaps admitting to the connections between identity and contact. However, most of the other parents in this group were able to see the link. This finding will be further examined in the following chapter.

An additional finding to emerge was that the majority of the adoptive fathers, five out of seven, in this group were less positive than their wives about the birth mother. Whilst they recognised the need for giving some positive information to their child about their birth parents (and indeed they gave some), they were significantly less positive in their answers about and attitudes towards the birth parents. It was difficult to locate quotes to illustrate this finding as often the adoptive father would simply add his opinion to that of the adoptive mother. For example, she would say that she thought the birth mother loved her child in her own way, or that the letterbox contact helped the child with identity issues, and the adoptive father would respond negatively.

Children without contact

Sample

The sample of children is the same as in No-contact group and Table 3 above, but some additional information about them is pertinent to identity. Two of the boys in the sample had letters from their birth mothers. Two of the children (full siblings placed together) had photographs of their birth parents. Some of the adopters had requested photographs of the birth mother, but these had not materialised. Six of the children who were older when placed had memories of their birth mother and sometimes of their birth father. All the adopters had their children's form E, which gave varying amounts of information about their children and about the birth families' physical appearance, personalities, interests, talents and medical status.

Findings on identity: children with no contact

(a) Awareness of being adopted and the gradual understanding of its meaning and implications

- The 12 children interviewed in this group, and also the other two girls who were not interviewed but whom I met, were well aware that they were adopted, so they were identical to the other group in knowing their adoptive status.
- Seven of the children were teenagers, and one was eleven and another nearly eleven. All had a clear understanding of the meaning and implications of being adopted, and knew why their birth family could not care for them, that they had different roots, and that their identity had been formed in some respects from their original families.
- Three of the children, aged six, seven and nine, while understanding that they had two sets of parents, did not yet fully understand the implications of heredity and identity formation or the full meaning of the legal basis of adoption. This group too matched the children of similar age in the group with contact.
- However, the nine-year-old in this group was more naive than the nine-year-old with contact.
- The six-year-old had a good grasp of the difference between her two families, and her understanding of the other implications was growing. Her seven-year-old sister had a similar understanding, but was somewhat preoccupied with her birth parents and was currently having therapy to help her understand her issues with her birth parents and their disappearance.

Nat, placed as a young baby and ten when interviewed, clearly knew he was adopted and had a good understanding of why his birth parents were unable to care for him. He explains:

Mum and Dad have told me things from the forms. They were both clever and young, university students and things. Maybe I talk like my birth mother, quiet and gentle.

In the identity game too Nat mentioned the possibility that he talks like his birth mother. Nat was typical of all the children in his group who had been told by their adopters about their birth parents, although the age of the children at telling, and the

amount of information given and available, differed. Two families were less at ease with giving information.

Nat was one of the eight children placed as a relinquished baby. None of these children had lifestory books, but had information from their form E, the social worker and often the foster carers. So although these children had no contact with their birth families, when compared with the children with contact who had no reciprocal information from their birth families they actually had a similar amount of old information. Two other boys had helpful letters from their birth mothers, outlined in the contact section. Many of these families would have liked to have more, and more recent, information, and indeed some had made efforts to get some, including Nat's family, but without success. Some of the birth families had just disappeared, perhaps some of the birth mothers had married, changed their names and moved away.

- All the families appreciated that information about their backgrounds was necessary to their children's identity formations.
- Most had made good use of what information they had and their children seemed satisfied for the moment.
- All but three of the children had included birth parents in their identity game, recognising that their identity was made up of many parts, including their birth parents' contributions.
- The three who had not included birth parents were the boy with serious attachment difficulties, and two children, placed together, whose parents were slightly uneasy with information giving.

(b) Awareness of one's ancestry and, where relevant, of one's ethnic heritage

- All the children were aware that they had a birth family to whom they were biologically related.
- As in the families with contact, the children referred to their original mothers and fathers as birth mummy and daddy, or sometimes used their first names – the teenagers especially did this.
- All but two of these children were of white English descent, as were their adoptive parents.
- Two children were of Irish descent, and they were placed with adoptive parents where the mother was Irish. They visited Ireland regularly and had encouraged their children in learning about their Irish roots.

- All the children were comfortable and at ease while talking about their birth parents during the interviews. Most of them felt that they had 'always known' that they were adopted.
- All the children also understood why they had been adopted and the circumstances of the adoption.

Identity formation for all adopted children means extra tasks for adopters. For black and mixed ethnicity children placed transracially there are even more hurdles to overcome. But the formation of their identity can be assisted in four ways (Prevatt Goldstein and Spencer 2000: 11):

- Carers can give positive messages about their identity all the time, including their ethnicity, culture, language and religion.
- Placements can be found which provide continuity with the children's previous experiences of these aspects of their identity.
- Positive role models can be found for these aspects of the children's identity.
- Experiences of continuity, and positive role models, should be available in the local neighbourhood and local schools and places of worship.

The most important thing in this context is to value the children's heritage, while not depreciating their other identities. Chapter 2 further discusses race and ethnicity.

The two youngest in the group, at six and seven, had some understanding of why they had needed to be adopted but as yet did not understand the legal implications. This is in accordance with Brodzinsky's (1984) Levels of Understanding. The older girl, Daisy, seemed to have a good basic identification with her birth family, but was somewhat concerned about her birth mother and was unclear about when and why she might meet her birth mother in the future. She was having professional help with this. Initially she would have liked her birth mum also to be adopted into her new family and to have the same nurturing from her adopters as she and her sister were enjoying. Daisy's birth parents were young and immature, had little family support and were involved in the local drug culture. It would seem that Daisy had possibly parented her mother and was now worrying about who had taken over this role. Her concern was exacerbated by her birth parents' disappearance. Perhaps some meetings between the two sets of parents and a one-off meeting may be helpful for Daisy some time in the near future if the birth parents can be located. Daisy may also have some residual anger for her birth parents over their abuse and neglect of herself and her sister and of two younger brothers placed with other adopters (Triseliotis 2000: 87).

From Daisy's quotes above it can be seen that she knows why her parents could not care for their children, and clearly she is repeating some of the words used by her adopters in explaining her background. But at seven she is still coming to terms with this and still gaining a better understanding of the circumstances and reasons for her parents' neglect. However, Brodzinsky (1984) also found that children between the ages of eight and ten may show obsessive interest in birth parents or a total lack of interest.

A good example of a child who feels he has 'always known' he was adopted and who gradually came to understand the meaning and implications of this – that he has another family, was given away, and has parts of his identity inherited from his birth mother – is Keelan, aged ten when interviewed.

I can't remember when I did find out, but it made me think when my [adoptive] mum said whatever. I used to think, well, they didn't like me, as in didn't want me. But when I read that letter I found they did want me but just couldn't look after me ... I think [birth mum] she's a bit like me actually, she's caring, she's nice. I can tell she's nice just by that letter. She's basically like [adoptive] mum, she's just like really nice. She cares for me even though she doesn't know where I am and what I'm doing.

Keelan had the advantage of a letter from his birth mother. Although only one other boy had a letter the other children had been given similar explanations by their adopters, that the birth parents loved them but were unable to look after them. So he is fairly typical of most of the group, not only of the children placed as babies but also of the older-placed children. They too had been given simple, honest, and some positive information about their birth parents and backgrounds.

Keelan also illustrates that a one-off conversation about being adopted is not enough. There is a need for ongoing explanations from the adopters, with the development of understanding, for reinforcement of old background information and the addition of new. In the case of some of the older-placed children, more difficult facts and explanations need to be given age-appropriately.

All the children, in varying degrees according to their age and understanding, were beginning to integrate or had integrated the information they had about their biological families into their maturing and developing self.

Another factor important to the growing understanding of the child is the child's perception of the openness of the parents, that is, their ease and comfortableness with disclosing background information. This will be explored below in the parents' section.

(c) Having access to genealogical, ethnic and other related information, including, where desired, face-to-face contact

- In eight of the nine families the children were able to ask their adopters about their birth families' looks, personalities and talents, and the circumstances of why they were adopted, and so on.
- Like the children with contact, these children had access to genealogical information through their adopters, who had all been given a form E which gave details of the child's birth parents, including descriptions of their physical looks, personalities, interests and talents, and medical background. The information depended on what the birth mother gave to the social worker and whether other birth family members were involved, and on the skills of the worker who completed the form.
- All except one child had photographs of their birth families.
- The photographs were given around the time of placement, so they were all now quite outdated.
- The photographs varied: from just one of the birth siblings but none of the birth mother or father; to one, now very out-of-date photograph of the birth mother; to a few photographs; and finally in one family to many photographs of the birth parents, siblings, and extended family.
- The five older-placed children also retain memories, both good and bad, of their birth families.

Adoption studies have found that it is of great value if the adopted child and adoptive parents have an opportunity of meeting the birth parent(s) and are able not only to have a physical view of each other, but also to share and obtain information directly (Triseliotis et al. 1997). In this group one adoptive family had met the birth mother. Other adoptive parents had been interested early in the placement in meeting the birth mother and father, but this was either not thought appropriate by the social worker, or the birth parents felt unable to carry out such a meeting. Sometimes it had been planned but the birth parent(s) did not turn up. All the adoptive parents when interviewed said they would support their children in a future meeting with their

birth mother. Nearly all the children were aware of this. One teenage girl, with parental and professional support, was hoping to meet her birth mother in the near future.

Ben, placed as a relinquished baby of ten weeks, was nearly thirteen when interviewed.

When I get older I might want to learn a little bit more and maybe meet my birth mum, but for now I'm all right ... I said, do you know anything [more], and they said 'no'. I don't think he was a very nice person. Mum said he went and left my birth mum.

Ben was typical of most of the children in his matter-of-fact, comfortable narrative about his birth family, which showed his ease and satisfaction with his parents' explanations and that he had enough information for now. Clearly from his manner, attitudes and answers to questions that as time passes he would be comfortable about asking his parents for reiteration and discussion of background information, and for advice and support when he felt it was time to meet his birth mother. He was typical, particularly of the teenagers, in his clear, forthright, unselfconscious responses.

Gaining an understanding of the meaning of being adopted tends to lead to other questions, perhaps about the birth father, as in Ben's case. He and another boy asked me if I knew anything about their birth father. Although Ben's adopters had little information, he believed them and was satisfied with their explanations about his birth family, although the information was sparse and outdated.

This handicap of old and limited information is common to both groups, as eight of the children in six families with letterbox contact also had no recently updated photographs or information, as their contact was onesided. Two children had direct contact with their maternal grandmother, and they gained a little information about their birth mother, and the boy felt he had part of his grandmother's outgoing personality. The remaining five children in three families had contact with birth siblings.

From the analysis of the narratives it did not seem that the children without contact had any lesser sense of identity than those with contact. Factors affecting this finding may be that for many of the children with contact the new information they

received was limited; indeed in the case of eight children in six of the families they had no new information or photographs since placement. For the children without contact who all had old information and photographs, this information had been reiterated over the years, to good effect as in the case of Keelan above. Other compensatory factors may be the satisfactory completion of the other extra tasks of adopted children (Triseliotis 2000: 92). As we have seen above, this has been carried out successfully for all except Oliver and Sally, who need more time, continued professional help, and maturity to develop their sense of identity further.

(d) The acknowledgement of the difference between psychosocial and biological parenting and, where relevant, the acknowledgement of one's ethnic and/or racial heritage and difference

The task here for adopted children is to recognise rather than deny the importance and existence of biological parents.

- Like the children with contact, all of this group clearly recognised that the adoptive parents who gave them everyday care, love and attention were their 'real' parents, that is, the mum and dad with whom they felt they belonged.
- They felt that they had come to be like this family in many ways, sometimes in looks and personalities, often in their skills, talents and interests.
- Simultaneously they recognised that they had also inherited some characteristics from their birth family, as demonstrated by the quotes above.

The children discussed these identity features during the interviews and whilst completing the identity game, which sometimes reminded them, or later their parents when they joined them, of aspects of their identity from both their families. Daisy discussed above was somewhat concerned with her birth mother. Rather than overidentifying with her birth mother, she seemed to be worrying about her birth mother's welfare. It may be that contact in this case could have been beneficial, and the adopters had attempted to gain information, but none was available as the birth parents had been in prison and then disappeared.

The achievement of distinguishing between adoptive and birth parents, without either being overly preoccupied with the birth parents or denying them, is illustrated by Trudy (13), who was placed with her older sister and younger brother over ten years ago.

We don't need contact because we can just go to them and say, cos to us, they are like our real mum and dad. They've been with us forever ... I don't think I look like her [birth mum], I look more like my [birth]dad, differently ... I think I look kind of like my [adoptive] mum and sister. I've got my [adoptive] dad's hands because of the double joints and the dexterity with the guitar.

Trudy reflects the other children in the group in her clear differentiation between birth and adoptive parents. She recognises each of them for the parts they have played in her identity formation. She is naturally curious for her age and developmental stage in the adoption process, but not overly so, indicating a healthy acknowledgement and acceptance of the difference between her two families. Triseliotis (2000) cites his 1973 study and those of Sachdev (1989) and Stein and Hoopes (1985) who ascribe over-concern with genealogical matters to poor relationships and lack of identification with the adoptive family. However, the latter study of adolescents found that good communication and openness about adoption produced higher identity scores in the young people. Brodzinsky (2005) accentuates good communication as a key factor in children's identity formation, and this is the message coming through from this study.

Trudy's family were not as comfortable talking about adoption as most of the other families in the group. However, they did address the subject from time to time and had been pleased that my involvement had brought it to the fore again. So Trudy's adoptive family are without doubt her 'forever family'. Trudy and her siblings like all of the other children in the group told me they felt able to talk to their parents about anything and ask their parents about their background. However, later in their interview Trudy and her sister explained that their parents had told them what they knew about their background and there were some questions to which they had no answers. It seemed that the children may have given up asking any more questions for the moment. Their parents in turn referred to sometimes waiting for their children to ask. A second family also reflected slightly less open and comfortable attitude to birth parents.

In another family in which the parents were open and communicative, their younger child Keelan quoted above communicated articulately and comfortably about his origins. But his older teenage sister was noticeably less communicative, and apparently had always been less interested and somewhat closed about her background. Brodzinsky (1984) indicates that some children are just like this. Whilst this girl knew the facts and was able to discuss adoption and its extra tasks

and implications intelligently and articulately during the interview and games, it was not a truly open or perhaps interesting subject for her. Perhaps, as with the other teenage girls in both groups, this was partly to do with her age and with some angry feelings towards her birth mother for giving her away. These issues will be examined further in the parents' section and in the following chapter.

(e) Dealing with the sense of loss and rejection that adoption inevitably conveys

Here the children are very similar to those with contact. As discussed above, all parties in the adoption circle have suffered losses. The bottom line for all adopted people is that their birth mother gave them up or 'allowed' them to be taken away. With the growing understanding of this concept the feelings of loss can arouse a sense of rejection, which in turn can be detrimental to a child's self-esteem and self-worth. For adopted children this complex state of loss with its accompanying feelings of rejection may be exacerbated by worry over the birth parents' wellbeing, as with Daisy quoted above. Having some form of contact with the birth family may reassure children that their birth parents are alive and well and that they remain interested in them. However, the children without contact do not have this potential benefit. How have they fared in dealing with their possible sense of loss and rejection?

- Most seem to have come to terms with the loss of their birth families. They are secure and happy, with a good sense of themselves.
- However, as with other forms of loss, feelings of rejection may include anger, denial and sadness, and these may recur from time to time, in adopted children particularly around adolescence (Fursland 2002).
- Like the children with contact, all the children except Oliver seem to have dealt with loss and rejection and to have the resources to deal with future feelings.
- Also similarly to the children with contact, these children without contact have, as outlined above, dealt well with the extra tasks of forming their identity. These strengths may in turn have helped them overcome some aspects of loss and rejection.

Triseliotis (2000: 88) concludes that studies found that some but not all feelings of loss and rejection could be healed by good adoptive experiences in an environment of security and empathy. His conclusion is supported by these findings, in the no-contact group, and will be further discussed in the following chapter.

Oliver, described and quoted above, may be a child who has not been able to resolve his feelings of loss and rejection. Conversely his two siblings, one younger and one older, are secure, with positive signs of identity formation. However, they had not experienced the same degree of abuse as their brother. Oliver's case will be further examined in the following chapter.

Physical, social and psychological identity

- All but one of the 12 children interviewed who had no contact currently have a good sense of themselves.
- Like those with contact, these children also knew to varying degrees about their backgrounds, why their birth mother could not look after them, whether or not they had siblings placed elsewhere, and so on.
- Two children, Tamsin and Mark, unrelated adoptive siblings, had some information and understanding about their backgrounds, and each of them in their narrative mentioned that their mum had told them they could ask her anything.
- However, it seemed they were cautious about doing so whilst feeling that they could if it was really important to them. Nevertheless, they had a positive sense of themselves in their social, psychological and physical identity.
- All the children except Oliver had feelings of being worthwhile, belonging and being loved. As Triseliotis (2000) suggests, other positive factors perhaps compensated for missing ones.

An example of good physical, social and psychological identity is Keelan, who presented as an engaging boy with a good sense of himself, shown by his comfortable and easy manner, his knowledge of his good and bad points, his independence along with appropriate dependence on his parents, and his acceptance and understanding of his background. His completion of the identity game *Who Do you ...?* showed a good and fluid sense of identity featuring all the main members of his adoptive family. He also refers to his birth mother as being nice, like him; although his birth father is a good footballer he himself is not. Keelan was placed as a relinquished 11-week-old baby and was interviewed when he was 11. Although he has no contact he is one of the boys who has a letter from his birth mother. Keelan explained how he and his parents felt about him:

I'm happy with the way I look now. I think I'm always happy. Maybe they [adoptive parents] should have mentioned I've got loads of energy ... Confident, sociable, caring, trusting, I am sensitive, like a joke ... I don't like football but I absolutely love rounders. I don't like the way when you're a boy you're expected to play football and you don't have to, there's nothing wrong if you don't ... It's just me ... I used to think, well, they [birth parents] didn't like me and they didn't want me. But when I read that letter I found that they did want me but just couldn't look after me.

Keelan was characteristic of his group: he perceives himself positively and likes himself and who he is. He does not conform to the typical boys-will-be-boys image and is quite comfortable about this aspect of himself. Furthermore he understands why he was relinquished and that his identity is a mix of his past and present.

So it seems that all the children without contact, apart from Oliver, had a good sense of identity, evident from their responses to the identity questions and confirmed in their completion of the Who Do You ...? sheet (Appendix 10). The two children whose parents are slightly less comfortable than the others in discussing birth families, are slightly less fluid in their sense of identity. This may improve as they mature. As with the children with contact, some of these children also took longer than others to become secure and build a stronger sense of themselves. But they had a good sense of identity even without the possible extra information about themselves that contact might have given them. Notably, most of the group with contact had no more information than this group did, and all but one of these without contact had well-formed identity. These findings will be examined and discussed in the next chapter.

Parents in families with no contact

Findings on identity

- All of the parents in the no-contact group perceived their children (with one exception) to have a good sense of themselves, although the time taken to achieve this had varied.
- The parents confirmed that the older-placed children had generally taken longer to form their identity than the children placed as babies.

The parents of Keelan, quoted above, felt that their son now had an excellent sense of himself, although he had gone through an insecure period some time ago. After further explanations about his background and after his adoptive mum had read to him his letter from his birth mother, Keelan's sense of himself became much more secure. Keelan's father Harry explained the above and described Keelan as:

Lively, inquisitive, speaks his mind, representing the school forum. I think he would say he is popular, happy, always dancing, not boisterous, though he did actually play tag roughly! ... We've answered all his questions that he's asked. He got upset and frustrated one time, saying you're not my real family and all that ... We took that as a sign ... [that he's ready to know more].

Keelan's parents had a very comfortable, open style of communicating with their son. While his mother Kate had originally thought that further information might wait until Keelan was sixteen, she and his father realised that perhaps he had not fully understood the letter from his birth mother and its implications about why he was adopted, that he had older brothers and that they could not manage to look after *any* other child. But they did love and care about him. So earlier information needed to be reiterated and further explained, and further questions that Keelan had were answered. After the explanations, and now able to understand his birth mother's letter, he felt reassured and more positive about himself and his biological identity. His adoptive parents too felt happier and confident about going on to the possible next stage, of supporting Keelan with searching for more information and maybe meeting his birth mother in the future. These parents' experiences are fairly characteristic of the others in the group, who may not have a letter to help them, but who find that usually a similar explanation of why the child was given up will help the child with identity issues (Triseliotis 2000).

The parents of Oliver, the exception to the rest of the group, felt that he had an insecure sense of himself. His dad John explained:

He wrote about 'me' for his RE homework, 'I'm helpful and happy.' I was quite shocked, well, I'm pleased he doesn't think everything's bad, does he? ... His favourite word is 'I don't know.' 'I don't know why I do it.' But no, he's over-confident, he thinks he can do anything and have everything ... If you saw him he'd be a happy, bright little boy, goodlooking lad, charm anybody. I think he would say that he was happy and all the rest of it, but I think he will

acknowledge that he tells lies. [He's] a bit false, and he looks a bit worried as well.

- All the adopters in the no-contact group feel that their children (except Oliver) have a good sense of their identity, which they have helped develop with information and explanation at appropriate times in the children's lives, and with praise and encouragement, to make them self-reliant and confident about themselves and about belonging in the family.
- All parents felt their children were comfortable about asking them questions about their backgrounds.
- They nearly all felt their children would ask for support with searching when they were older.
- Lack of contact has not prevented these children, with the exception of Oliver, from developing a good sense of identity.
- The only slight difference between this group without contact and the other with contact, was that one family with contact was less comfortable about talking to their children about their background.
- Another family in this group was moderately less comfortable about talking to their children about their background. One of these two families had not had the opportunity of attending a preparation group.
- A further similarity between the two groups was that parents were able to make connections between contact, information and identity formation.

These findings will be explored and discussed in the following chapter.

Three further themes which emerged from the study

1 The relation between the time the children spent with their birth families and the period of time it takes them to become secure in their adoptive families

Children with and without contact

Table 4: Children with contact: time taken to become securely attached

Name	Age at placement (years: months)	Age at interview	Time taken (as reported)
Fiona	3:9	14	About 3 to 4 years
Dan	1:5	12	Not very long
Trinnie	3:3	11	3 years
Robert	2:3	10	2 years; some later difficulties
Kate	9:0	15 $\frac{3}{4}$	Still attaching
Sam	7:0	13 $\frac{3}{4}$	7 years
Terri	0:11	6	Early
Dori	6:0	7	Just over 1 year
Tom	1:6	6	About 18 months
Chloe	1:0	10	Took a while
Holly	10:0	12	1 to 2 years maybe
Tarra	3:0	6 $\frac{3}{4}$	Fine from the beginning
Kyle	1:5	9 $\frac{3}{4}$	Unsure

Table 5: Children without contact: time taken to become securely attached

Name	Age at placement (years: months)	Age at interview	Time taken (as reported)
Beth	4:0	14	4 years
Trudy	2:0	12	2 years
Oliver	3:0	13	Not yet attached
Daisy	4:0	7	Not quite attached
Lizzie	3:0	6	3 years
Tanya	0:4	14	Early
Keelan	0:3	11	Early
Mark	0:4	14	Early
Tamsin	0:8	10	Early
Laura	5:0	18	1 ½ years
Ben	0:4	13	Early
Nat	0:4	10	Early

This finding emerged unexpectedly from the first three questions. Quinton et al. (1998), Triseliotis et al. (1997) and Neil (2004) also found that older children took longer to settle and become attached, but did not identify the remarkable similarity between the time with the birth family and in the care system, and the time it took some children to become securely attached in their adoptive family.

Findings on the time to settle: children with and without contact

- Five children out of 13 in the families with contact
- And three children out of 12 in the no-contact group were found to have taken a similar length of time to become secure in their adoptive families as they had spent with their birth families and in the care system (Tables 4 and 5).

The time it took them to settle was elicited from the children's and parents' transcripts. The children related vivid, sad and poignant memories of their early months and years with their birth families, clearly based on their earlier experiences of being moved around, not having enough food or clothes, and being scared and insecure. Then, over the years of settling and learning to trust, they described themselves as feeling safe, cared for physically and emotionally, and belonging in this family. For these children this had taken as much time as they had spent without a secure family.

Fiona (14), who joined her adoptive family when she was three and three-quarters, describes first how she felt when she first joined her adoptive family, then how she feels now:

It was really scary cos I didn't know what they were expecting from me – what was going to happen. And of course I had been moved around quite a lot, so I was wondering if this was going to be another place I'm going to go for a while and move again. I think it was about half a year when I got kind of settled in, but about two or more years before I was fully sure I was going to stay here and everything ... I have a mum and dad, I just like being here, I like the environment. It's a kind of secure place to be. Instead of where I could have been. I think that would have been kind of scary if I hadn't been adopted.

Fiona clearly shows her profound early insecurities. It is therefore unsurprising that she took years to trust her adopters and realise she was staying and belonged. Currently she presents as a confident, secure teenager who knows she is loved and will always have a family whom she can turn to for support, no matter what. Fiona's case mirrors those of the other children in both groups who told similar stories.

- The older-placed children took between one and seven years to become secure.
- Of the eight children in the group with contact whose length of time to settle did not relate to their time with their birth parents, four were placed as babies, and two older girls placed at nine and ten were both settling well but still had some insecurities.
- One child and her adoptive mother were unsure how long she had taken; one toddler placement was said to have always been fine.
- In the no-contact group eight children were placed as babies and settled easily and early.
- Of those who took a time to settle similar to their age at placement, one was four, one nearly three and one over two.
- In the cases of the younger children I am relying mainly on the evidence of the parents. In all three cases the male and female partners were consistent about the length of time taken by the children to settle, and they had various anecdotes and connections to other events which supported these estimates. (Although two of these younger children had memories, these seem to have been prompted by photographs, a video and possibly family stories.) This finding is discussed further in the next chapter.

Parents in the families with and without contact

Sample

The samples are described above in The meaning of contact in family life.

Conceptualisation and questions

Questions asked of the children and parents were similar. Parents' perceptions generally complemented the children's, but one or two estimated the time as slightly longer; for example, Fiona's mum thought it took her daughter four years to settle, while Fiona thought three.

Findings

- Of the ten sets of parents with contact, five families had children who had taken between two and seven years to become secure.
- Three of these five families also had other adopted children, younger siblings placed at a younger age, who had settled and become secure relatively quickly.
- One girl aged seven at placement settled and become secure within a year
- Another girl placed aged nine with her brother was still occasionally insecure, perhaps because of her teenage lifestage.
- The majority of parents without contact had baby placements and, as reported in the attachment findings, their babies had settled early and easily.

Findings on the time to settle: parents in families with and without contact

An example of this finding from the parents' perspective comes from Diana and John, the parents of Beth (14) who was placed at age four along with her two younger siblings. Diana explained,

She was a very frightened little girl, never answered back, it was ages before she did ... When she finally did I thought, 'Good for you', and it was like a flower, her face beamed and ooh. And that was the start of things really. From there she blossomed. I mean, she was four when she came ... and seven, nearly eight before fully secure. She's her own person now.

This quotation exemplifies the finding, which is also supported by the children's quotes above and elsewhere in the study. The parents of the three older-placed children in the no-contact group, discussed above, confirmed that their children had taken a similar period of time to settle and become secure as their age at placement.

All these children had experienced serious forms of neglect and physical, emotional and sexual abuse. So it is unsurprising that overcoming these experiences takes time. Their parents remembered quite vividly how the children were when they first came to live with them, describing them as scared, withdrawn, delayed in their development, chaotic, unable to relax, and lacking trust. In the first few months they began 'to find their feet' and become more relaxed. With the passage of time, up to four years in this group (but seven years in the group with contact where there were a larger number of older children), it became noticeable that the children realised

they were here to stay and knew their family could be trusted and would always be there for them. It had required immense patience, determination, nurturing and trust-building from the parents, to achieve the security that these children now demonstrated.

2 Adoptive mothers' feelings of desolation at the time of contact

Findings

- Half of the ten mothers in the contact group described profound feelings of desolation close to the time of contact with the birth family.
- They had immense difficulty finding appropriate words, and perhaps admitting to, these perplexing feelings.
- For most of the year, except around the time of meeting a birth grandmother or writing letters to birth mothers, the adoptive mothers felt reasonably comfortable and positive about contact and its benefits.
- The feelings of desolation were found with almost every kind and degree of contact, from face-to-face two or three times a year, to a brief letter of information sent annually.
- The exception was contact between siblings, usually placed with other adoptive families; this did not give rise to these powerful feelings.

Marie described her feelings around the time of writing to the birth mothers of her three children:

Gutted ... They are yours, blood, bone and everything. It [contact] makes you realise that they are adopted, and other times it takes you out of your comfort zone ... You can just carry on as if you are in a normal family, cos you are a normal family. Sometimes you can get quite emotional, you've got to start remembering things, that they're not, you know ...[born to you], you've got to talk about it as if you're telling another mum [the birth mum] about your children. They are ours, but it's as though you've actually given birth to them and we've made them, and that's the way I actually feel, and writing these letters breaks that sometimes ... and that's the bit I don't really ... [tears].

Demonstrating the complex and contradictory nature of the adoptive mothers' feelings throughout her narrative, Marie also showed empathy for the birth mothers and positive attitudes to them and to contact and its benefits. Her older daughter, she felt sure, would want to meet her birth mother, and she was understanding and supportive about this. Whilst recognising and appreciating the 'gifts' from the birth mothers, Marie felt confident about her entitlement to the children, displaying healthy feelings of considering herself to be the 'real' mother. It did not appear that Marie's profound feelings of despair arose from her omitting to address or only partially addressing her infertility, though this cause would be suggested by practice wisdom (Stroebe et al. 2003, Reich 1990: 5, Brebner et al. 1985: 22). This theme will be further examined in the next chapter.

One exception to mothers who had profound feelings of desolation at the time of contact was Nell. She and her two teenage children meet their much younger brother and his adoptive family a few times a year. Sometimes it's for celebrations, and sometimes the other family just drop in, as they did when I was interviewing the children, and it all seemed very comfortable and natural. Nell sends a book of information with photographs to the children's birth mother annually. She clearly does not share the feelings of desolation of Marie. She characterises the other half of the adoptive mothers, saying:

It doesn't arouse any strong feelings, cos as I say, Jacqui, I've never met her ... I just try to give her a little glimpse of what their life might be like with me ... I feel more like, well, you know, these children are marvellous, I'm the lucky one here ... I'm the one that has these children, can't you see how lucky I am ... It's that kind of feeling when writing the letter. They feel like my children anyway.

Nell has empathy for the birth mother and her loss of these children in whom Nell obviously delights. She has been requesting photographs for the children since they were placed seven years ago, which the birth mother has not provided. Nor has a meeting between the two mothers been achieved, because of the birth mother's mental ill-health and drug misuse. Nell displayed no negative attitudes towards the birth mother until my questions raised some anger about the abuse. This theme will be further examined in the following chapter.

Children's feelings at the time of contact

- Two girls, one nearly 16 and one 11, felt angry with their birth mother.
- Both wanted to meet their birth mother in the future and address their anger towards her during the meeting.
- The two younger brothers of these girls had experienced similar neglect and abuse, but felt reasonably alright about contact and possibly meeting their birth mother in the future.
- A third girl felt somewhat irritated by the irresponsible behaviour of her birth mother and may want to meet her in the future, but was not despairing or sad around the time of contact.

So these girls were not reflecting the feelings of despair narrated by their adoptive mothers. Mackaskill (2002: 107) found that teenagers felt uncomfortable at contact when a birth and an adoptive parent of the same gender were present: 'the tensions associated with this were enormous.' This may have some link with my finding. This theme will be further explored in the next chapter.

Fathers' feelings at the time of contact

Fathers, although generally more negative or sceptical about contact, showed no profound feelings of despair or sadness as experienced by half the mothers. Even those fathers who were very negative about contact did not reflect the deep feelings of the women.

Mothers in the group with no contact: did they have feelings of despair?

No mothers in the group without contact expressed any feelings of profound despair similar to the feelings of five mothers who had contact, when reflecting on their child's birth family. When asked what contact meant to them or might have meant, they were all generally aware of the possible benefits of information and links with the birth mother, but tended to be relieved that they did not have any contact, as they felt apprehensive or slightly worried about contact in general or the birth mother's possible influence on the child. One adoptive mother and one adoptive father expressed somewhat jealous feelings, in case their child when she reached her teens might possibly prefer the birth mother. Some of the adoptive mothers mentioned friends who were experiencing unsatisfactory contact, and they were relieved to be free of this.

A fairly typical example of adoptive mothers who did not have contact was Tracey, the mother of four-year-old Wendy. She had initially believed they would have contact, but the birth family withdrew. Tracey and her husband had met the birth mother and found this to be beneficial. Tracey explained her feelings about contact:

I hated the idea, absolutely hated it. But if it is inevitable in the long run then that's the way it is. I think the hardest thing is because up until then you could pretend, I know you shouldn't, but you could completely forget that this other person is there. Knowing more about her background would be nice. I don't think there's anything particularly unhelpful about it, but it would be nice just to forget about it.

While feeling strongly about contact and relieved they did not have it, Tracey did not present the profound feelings of sadness and despair which half the mothers with contact had. There was obviously no contact to activate the feelings of profound despair which the mothers with contact had experienced. This theme will be further discussed in the following chapter.

Fathers in the group with no contact

The fathers in this group had no profound feelings about contact. In the main they felt relieved just not to have it. As outlined in the contact section, the fathers were more negative than the mothers in each group. They seemed simply to accept that they did not have contact and that this might be for the best.

3 Children's graphic perception to their closeness to their siblings, both with and without contact

Findings

This finding emerged from the Four Field Relationship game (figure 2). After an explanation of the game the children chose a doll to represent themselves and placed it in the centre of the board. Then they chose dolls to represent those whom they really loved, usually parents and siblings. Nearly all the children chose the same dolls to represent themselves and their siblings as their siblings in turn chose to represent themselves and the other children.

The children did not always choose, to represent themselves, the doll which obviously reflected their own physical looks. For example, Beth, who is a tall

slender young woman with long blonde hair, chose a stocky little doll with plaited red hair. Both of her siblings chose the same doll to represent their older sister. Beth chose dolls to represent her siblings which did resemble them and each of the siblings also chose those dolls.

This finding was most unexpected, and was noticed in the first family interviewed and then repeatedly found in most of the other sibling groups. It graphically demonstrated the closeness of all these groups of siblings, which including Oliver the most troubled child.

- This finding was true for all but three of the sibling groups.
- Two of these three groups were made up of younger children with much younger siblings.
- The other group had one older and one much younger sibling
- The very young siblings enjoyed the game, but their concentration span was much less than that of the older sample children.

This very important finding about the closeness of siblings is most salient for contact and is discussed earlier and in the next chapter.

Findings: conclusion

- The outstanding and most surprising and salient finding was the similarities between the two groups of families.
- That is, the children in both groups, apart from one in each, despite many having had early insecure attachments and identities, were now found to be securely attached with well-formed identity.
- The contradictory attitudes to contact were striking
- The everyday profile of contact was low, but for many adoptive mothers it created a sense of despair around the time of contact.
- Contact meant for the parents gaining information for their children and leaving the door open for the future, in case their child should wish to meet her birth family.
- The children were very matter-of-fact about contact
- They enjoyed meetings with siblings and a grandmother, but regarded them as distant friends or relatives rather than close kin.
- Almost none of the parents and children made any connection between attachment and contact.
- All the sample, except one child, could make connections between identity and contact.

When I set out on this research I expected to find the two groups to be very different. For example, I expected that the group of children with contact would be more securely attached and have better-formed identity than the children without contact. But indeed this was not the case. I had based my expectations on my long-held belief that contact had benefits for all parties in adoption, particularly for the children, who gained information for their identity formation, gained a sense of worth from their birth parents' ongoing interest, and were enabled to attach to their adopters. This was confirmed from practice wisdom through my work with adopted adults, and also from the research of Triseliotis (1973, 2000), Feast et al. (1998) and Triseliotis et al. (2005). Fratter (1996: 7) also supports this: 'The benefits of adoptive parents having direct information about their children's birth relatives and, in some cases, "permission" to parent, have become widely recognised.' However, Fratter is also cautious, as I am now: 'While attitudes concerning the possibility of greater openness in adoption have changed significantly in the UK since the 1980s, there remains considerable uncertainty about the maintenance of contact, particularly face-to-face contact, after adoption' (p7). The authors cited above, and others including Quinton et al. (1998) and Neil and Howe (2004), are also cautious

and are quoted in chapter 2. Despite the acknowledged benefits of contact, nevertheless the two groups were equally well attached and had equally well-formed identity.

Many of my findings are supported by those of other researchers. For example, Quinton et al. (1998), Rushton et al. (2001) and Triseliotis et al. (1997) found that older children take longer to settle than younger placed children. Hodges and Tizard (1989: 95) found, as I have, that adoptive parents take more interest in their children than ordinary middleclass parents. That birth mothers' practical and emotional difficulties prevented them from reciprocating letterbox contact, is confirmed by Neil (2004) and Smith and Logan (2004). Quinton et al. (1998) and Bell et al. (2001) found that adoptive parents, whilst knowing the benefits of contact, had reservations about it. Sykes (2000) found that adoptive fathers were more negative than adoptive mothers about contact. That the essence of identity formation and secure attachment is not contact, but openness and comfortable communication in the adoptive family about the birth family and adoption circumstances, was also found by Brodzinsky (2005).

Two findings are new to research: the adoptive mothers' feelings of despair at the time of contact, and the similarity between a child's time with the birth parents and the length of time it takes for the child to become securely attached. A third salient finding came from comparing two groups, one with contact and one without, and it is that good communication is the essence of secure attachments and well-formed identity in adoptive children.

These findings raise many important questions. For instance, are there cases where contact is contra-indicated? Is contact only about information sharing? Should adopters always be prepared to have contact? These are addressed in the Discussion and chapter 2. However, some fundamental questions cannot yet be answered, for instance, Which kind of contact benefits children best? And what kind of contact can adopters best cope with? Whilst I go on to discuss these and other hard questions, it is too early to know the 'results' of contact, which is relatively new. Ongoing longitudinal research is needed.

Chapter 7

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the research. I examine the benefits or detriments of post-adoption contact or of no contact to adoptive family life and relationships, and the essence of the children's attachments and identity formation. Causal connections are examined and analysed through the perceived meaning that contact has for the children and their parents. The discussion takes account of the literature review and of my theoretical framework of attachment and identity. I also seek to identify gaps in the research knowledge, and to see how my findings or other future research might address these. The material here is in the same three sections as the findings (Contact, Attachment, Identity), but in each section I have brought together the children with and without contact, then the parents with and without contact, to emphasise the similarities and differences between the groups and to highlight the main points.

Contact

Introduction

Contact is now the norm in most adoptions, and in this section I examine the meaning of contact for the children and their adoptive parents. I discuss the children first, looking at their feelings about contact, their attitudes and reactions to it, the anger felt by some teenage girls, how different the children feel from their birth family, how close they feel to their siblings, how contact relationships change, and adoption outcomes.

Second, I examine the meaning of contact for adoptive parents, looking at their attitudes to contact, to the lack of contact, and to letterbox contact, the most common in this study and others cited earlier, which is often not reciprocated. I explain open and closed communication in adoptive families, and give examples of exceptional openness and of openness without contact. Then I discuss the ambivalent and negative feelings about contact that I found, the many factors that

influence parents' attitudes to contact, the feeling of desolation that afflicts some mothers around the time of contact, gender differences in attitudes to contact, and the importance of feeling in control of contact.

The meaning of contact for the children in both groups

Face-to-face contact

The children's face-to-face contact was mostly with their siblings; only one grandmother and one set of birth parents were involved (table 2). The children had not really thought about the meaning of contact until I asked them. Their responses were often something like, 'Its nice to see my sister', or 'I don't know', followed by a description of their meetings with grandma or siblings or what they and their mother sent to their birth mother. So in my discussion I have tried to elicit and analyse what it seemed to mean to them.

The children enjoyed the outings and treats that came from contact. Seeing their grandmother in one case and siblings in the others, gave them some new, and reinforced some old, information; gave them a sense of connectedness, physical and emotional, with their birth family; gave them a sense of their birth family's interest; and promoted a sense of being worthwhile. During the meetings children recognised similarities of physical looks and personality which promoted the feeling of connectedness. Family news, and old retold stories related by their adoptive and birth families, assisted in building and maintaining relationships in both families. Seeing their birth and adoptive families getting on with each other and with siblings placed elsewhere was important to the children. This was what contact meant to the children.

Janet was the only child in the sample who had direct contact separately with her birth mother and father, but she did not enjoy it, unlike the contact with her brother. She related during her interview that they had been nasty to her in the past and were still nasty. She had experienced physical and emotional abuse. Three children in the study of Thomas et al. (1999: 96) had similar feelings about contact, where there had been abuse.

Quinton (speaking at the conference Contact for Children in Permanent Family Placement, Norwich, 2003) found that a significant number of adoptive children were experiencing abuse during contact. Fortyone percent of the face-to-face contact, in his study, was unsupervised; all of the children and young people in the sample had

already suffered adversities while living in their birth family. During post-adoption contact 21% experienced physical abuse, 6% sexual and 11% emotional abuse. Notably, these were some of the reasons why these children were removed from their birth family.

Unsupervised contact is clearly inappropriate for children removed from abusive parents and then placed in a continuing unsafe situation. Supervised, safe and appropriate contact arrangements need to be substituted, or contact suspended. Through letter exchange the abuse may be addressed and apologies given by the birth relatives. Howe (1998) and Howe and Steele (2004) also address this concern, advocating similar measures.

Indirect letterbox contact

There was letterbox contact with five birth mothers, one birth father living separately, two birth parents living together, and the maternal and paternal grandparents of one girl and two siblings (table 2). The writing of the letters was carried out generally by the adoptive mothers. When the children were old enough their families involved them in choosing photographs and information and encouraged them to send a drawing or note to their birth relatives. My analysis showed that the children did this in a very matter-of-fact way, but at the same time the communication, even if not reciprocated, engendered feelings of openness and the reassurance that their birth family was interested in them and had information about their life and their new family. The benefits and difficulties of letterbox contact are discussed in chapter 2, and by others including Neil (2004: 57) and Triseliotis (1994: 2).

Children without contact

Most of the children in the no-contact group, like their counterparts with contact, had not thought much about contact per se. My questions about it and about what they thought of it, concerned something quite unknown to most of them. Like their opposite numbers, they gave the explanation that contact was a link of some kind. Their response to the unknown or unwanted was somewhat neutral or negative; the teenagers, for instance, said they 'didn't need it', mum and dad could answer their questions and support them with future meetings if they decided on this. The familiarity, ease and comfortableness of family life without contact was what was familiar and positive for them. The family's openness about their backgrounds was shown by the children's ability to ask questions, request information and photos of their birth family, and discuss a possible future meeting with their birth mother and siblings. These children, unlike researchers and practitioners, had not considered

the concept of contact informing, reassuring and keeping doors open for them; they felt their mum and dad had fulfilled or would fulfil these needs.

It may also be that the children without contact had absorbed their parents' sense of accepting and making the best of not having any kind of contact. Indeed some of them had previously experienced contact and chosen to terminate it. Others may also feel it is for the best that they do not have contact, as it may upset the status quo. It would of course be fascinating to interview these children again in the future and hear their more mature views on contact, as did Fratter (1996: 235).

Indifference to contact

Though these children without contact had no current information about their birth families or siblings, they were not ostensibly concerned about this. It may be that for the majority the open communication of their adopters had reassured them that they would be supported in seeking information and, if possible, a meeting with birth relatives when they were older and felt ready for this. Just as the children with contact accepted it when it took place, so these children without contact took in their stride their lack of contact, as did their adoptive parents. That they were able to ask and speculate about siblings indicated their comfortableness with discussing their other family with their adopters. Of the ten children in the study of Thomas et al. (1999: 104) who had no contact with siblings, four would have liked contact, and six were content to be without (it was assumed), insofar as they did not wish to change anything about their lack of it. However, children's feelings about contact are likely to evolve over time, and the children in Thomas et al., like mine, may wish to contact their siblings in future.

Several factors may have influenced the children's disinterest in their past and their birth relatives. First, it may simply be a part of these children's less curious personalities. For the moment they do not feel the need for any kind of contact with birth relatives (Brodzinsky 2005). A second factor might be that all the children had busy and fulfilling lives involving school and its associated pursuits, and leisure activities with parents, extended family and friends. Connected with this is what Tizard (1977: 242) noted, that adoptive parents spend more time with their children than ordinary middleclass families. This may indicate that adoptive parents would also invest time and attention in explaining their origins to their children. Thus a communicative openness evolved within the families, clear from the children's narratives. Brodzinsky (2005) supports this, in the sense that the majority of these

children could ask their parents anything. So the children had an open and communicative adoption, although structurally it was closed.

Thirdly, older-placed children and teenagers with immensely busy lives also had memories of their past, and feel there is enough going on without the possible complications of contact with a birth family remembered as often chaotic, abusive and unreliable. One articulate older girl, Laura, quoted in the Findings, explained this during her interview, and other children may have similar feelings. By contrast, a fourth factor, in one family, was a less open and communicative environment when it came to background issues, which may have influenced their children's disinterest in their origins. These children were securely attached, had a good sense of themselves, and their parents were warm and caring and interested in and attuned to their children's many needs, except their need for fuller ongoing explanations of their background. So although they had been told that they could ask their mum anything, they did not. Their mother said they never asked anything and therefore had no interest. She and the father clearly felt relieved and safer.

Factors influencing information seeking

Considering children like those above, Triseliotis (2000) says that for some children today feelings of being unable to ask about their background remain. Feast and Howe (2000) found that some adopted adults waited until their adoptive parents had died before searching for information about their birth family. Factors apparent in the two families uncomfortable with 'explaining' were: their lack of empathy with the birth parents; negative, pessimistic feelings about them; claiming that the children did not ask and therefore were not ready to hear about their backgrounds, or that the children would not be able to understand; and (in one family) 'keeping it safe for later' but withholding information received from the birth family. Gender may also be a factor here, as both these families had a stronger male partner who was more negative towards contact. In another family where the partners were more equal but the dad was very negative about contact, the positive female perspective prevailed. Many of the positive women could be described as the stronger partner, a factor which Francis et al. (1992) advocated as an attribute for adoptive parenting, as indeed are tolerance, respect and valuing each other within the relationship.

Angry teenage girls

Five girls, in open communicative families, without contact, were angry with their birth mother. Two talked of their plans to meet with her and address some unanswered questions, about whether the mother ever thought about them and if

they had any siblings. This anger for most of the girls took the form of aggravation, exasperation and displeasure with their birth mothers, and was not a source of overwhelming rage. How could a mother give up her baby, they wondered. Some had schoolfriends who with the support of their parents were bringing up a child – so why couldn't their birth mother have done the same?

Gender is a factor here, since this was found in girls and not in any boys; it was clearly linked with being female. Another common factor was their ages: they were approaching or in their teens. Thirdly, three girls remembered the abuse they had experienced in their birth families (and the other two were placed as babies).

Comparing these girls with those who had contact, revealed that two with contact were also angry with their birth mother; one was nearly 16, the other was 11, and both had memories of abuse in their birth families. It may be speculated that the girls with contact were less likely to experience anger with their birth mother because it had been addressed and resolved. However, in examining their ages it seems that age may be a factor here too, as there were more teenage girls in this no-contact group. No boys in either group displayed any form of anger with their birth mother, including those who remembered being neglected and abused.

I am not aware of any other research that has identified this issue of young adopted females' anger with their birth mother. Feast (2000) found that more women adoptees searched for their birth families, and they searched at a younger age, but not as young as these girls. But she did not find that anger was a feature. However, her sample was much older, and like Laura the oldest of the angry girls, perhaps with maturity they too had come to a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding the necessity for their adoption.

I wondered if the girls who were angry had less positive feelings about being safer, more secure and more stable and having better relationships in their adoptive families, but this was not the case when I examined the transcripts. Kate was possibly the girl who was most annoyed with her birth mother, but she also very much appreciated how much better off she was in her adoptive placement. Being angry with their birth mother, and being happy and relieved to be adopted, were profound feelings held both at the same time by some girls in both groups. On reflection, a certain amount of anger for the birth mother who gave them away is explicable at this life stage when hormones and feelings are highly charged and

abundant. It may be that the open communication in their families enabled these girls to express their anger.

Children's feelings of becoming different from their birth parents

A recurring theme in the interviews with five children with contact was their realisation that they had become quite different in their adoptive family – that is, quite different from their birth mother and father, and from the way they might have been if they had remained with their birth parents. This was something of which they were well aware. They felt that they would not repeat the immature, neglectful, poor parenting and the inadequacies of their birth parents. Their experiences of parenting were now different, and the challenging behaviours they presented when first placed had changed immensely.

Three girls and possibly a fourth, without contact, had come to a realisation of becoming different from their birth mother. This is particularly interesting in comparison with the contact group, as my hypothesis would have been that contact and information would give the children stronger evidence for the realisation that they are now different. Conversely, in the group without contact, there would not be the same indicators of difference; there would be less realisation of difference, and instead some form of idealisation of the birth parents as a result. However, this was not so. From their memories, and from the photos and written and verbal information given by their birth family, foster carers and social workers before or in the early stages of placement, three girls were very clear about how different they had become from their birth mother. Their adoptive parents had also reiterated the information in an ongoing, age-appropriate way.

Reasons for the children becoming different

The complex reasons for becoming different included the children's own personality and resilience, the nature of the abuse and neglect they had suffered, and the nurturing parenting style of the adopters, which contributed to a more positive IWM. Howe et al. (1999: 230) inform us, 'With the prospect of new relationships at any stage in the lifespan, a reorganisation of existing internal working models is always possible.' Another important influence may be the information gained from ongoing contact of any kind. The children with contact were reminded of the reality of their birth parents' difficulties and inadequacies, and did not idealise them or build up unrealistic fantasies.

Differences between biological and adoptive relationships

The relationships with birth family members were different in kind from those formed in the children's adoptive family, because the children were maintaining or building comparatively remote relationships with their birth relatives. One boy explained the relationships as: 'OK but more distant, not like my proper sisters here.' These relationships were considered more like relationships with cousins or friends who are seen from time to time. Their 'real family' was the one in which they lived, were loved and belonged. This finding, that birth relatives were considered to be more distant than their actual biological relationship, is comparable with the findings of Fratter (1996), Triseliotis et al. (1997), Thomas et al. (1999: 102-104), and Macaskill (2002).

Children's closeness to their siblings

The children's graphic perception of their closeness to siblings, in both the groups with and without contact, emerged from the relationship game, which is described in chapter 5. All the children with siblings, except the two youngest, chose the same doll to represent themselves as their brothers or sisters chose to represent them. The children did not always choose the doll that reflected their own physical looks, which is one of the interesting features of this finding, although sometimes they did choose the obvious doll, and their siblings did too.

Interest in and knowledge of their birth siblings was important to the children, and they also enjoyed being part of a sibling group in their adoptive family. It did not seem to matter about the precise relationships of the siblings, whether they were from the same or a different birth family or were children born to the adopters; they were loved and considered as true brothers and sisters. Most children in the study both explicitly and implicitly communicated their closeness to their siblings, as well as their niggles with them.

All the children wondered about or knew about birth siblings elsewhere and anticipated that they might in future wish to contact them. This agrees with the findings of Feast and Howe (2000), and also with Brodzinsky (1984 and 2005), that all adopted people wonder at some time and to some extent about their past.

So despite the possible complexities of contact it seems that contact between siblings should be striven for, where it is possible and appropriate, if the children are unable to live together. However, where abuse has occurred between the siblings

direct contact may not be appropriate; and particularly where a child is expressing concern about contact, she may feel safer with supervised indirect contact or none.

The relationship game in a simple and unexpected way seems to confirm that it is right for brothers and sisters to live together, particularly those who have already lost their original parents and relatives, along with friends, school and teachers, community, pets, and much that is familiar and helps to make life secure and comfortable. Lord and Borthwick (2001: 1, 4) tell us that brothers and sisters who share a childhood and grow up together have potentially the longest-lasting relationship and one of the closest relationships of their lives with each other.

Studies of sibling placements generally report a better outcome with lower disruption rates and higher rates of adoptive parent satisfaction. However, some studies cited by Rushton et al. (2001: 5-6) were not so positive, including the Canadian study of Thorpe and Swart (1992) who speculated that the singly placed children thrived on individual attention and found it easier to connect with adult caregivers. Rushton et al. also point out that findings are complex, showing both the advantages and the disadvantages in the choice of placements. Practice wisdom also reflects the advantages and disadvantages of siblings, as does Parker (1999). However, it is an immensely complex area, as is even the definition of siblings. I have examined only the biologically related and adoptive siblings, but the children who experience the care system may have half-siblings, step-siblings, foster siblings and so on. Then there are the existing sibling relationships, which may be short- or longstanding or may never have existed, as further children may have been born into the birth family; and of course new sibling relationships also develop within the adoptive family.

Rushton et al. (2001: 4) tell us: 'Only recently has the issue of siblings in substitute care become a focus for research and there are a number of questions that are yet to be fully addressed. There has been no recent comprehensive, critical review of empirical studies on the progress of sibling placements, in part perhaps because there has not been a great deal to review. There is good evidence on the frequency of sibling placements and a steadily growing practice literature but little beyond this.' Perhaps these findings add a little to this gap in the research.

Changes in contact relationships

Contact relationships change over time, and the need felt for them changes. Relationships between siblings may be new ones, ones that have lapsed, or

ongoing relationships that are being maintained and developed. In my study new siblings were born and placed elsewhere, contact was arranged, and new relationships begun. Siblings were sometimes of very different ages, and had different interests, values and lifestyles. In the early days of contact children and adults were not entirely comfortable with each other. Birth mothers and fathers who had initially reciprocated letterbox contact had stopped, but may take it up again in the future. The changing relationships and the changing needs and wishes of all parties created difficulties over time.

Many of the families managed the contact well and made their own changes accordingly. The children, with their adopters' support, took changes in their stride. However, some children, birth parents and adoptive parents would have benefited from ongoing mediation from their adoption agency, as the initial contact arrangements were no longer appropriate. These unusual relationships in unusual circumstances need ongoing attention and encouragement, according to the changing needs of all those involved, if they are to survive and grow.

The literature does not examine these issues of contact relationships in depth. Future research may be worthwhile to study the children's perceptions of how changes occur to their relationships with birth relatives over time.

Outcomes

All 13 children found family life happy and enjoyable, irrespective of the type of contact, and they felt they belonged in this family and always would, no matter what might happen. The children without contact had all been in placement for a considerable time; many placed as babies and toddlers had less complex and abusive backgrounds than most children in the contact group; and these are factors which bode well for adoptive placements. The children with contact, more of whom had complex backgrounds, had become equally happy and secure.

My sample was self-selected, so it could be considered that only happy, successful families had agreed to take part. Indeed this is the case; nevertheless, as outlined elsewhere, many of these families, particularly those who had late-placed children with sad, abusive and complex backgrounds, had experienced many years of profound difficulties because of the children's backgrounds. Some of these challenges persist or had persisted until recently.

Factors influencing positive outcomes

The positive outcomes may be the result of many factors, including family dynamics, the parents' profound motivation to become a family, and their immense investment of time, interest, encouragement, consistency and love of their children. The children's grumbles about discipline, boundaries and arguments (mainly with siblings) were just part of family life, just as their friends experienced. Discipline and boundaries were considered as elements of their parents' care, and arguments were seldom serious or longlasting. Generally they felt at ease and able to ask their parents anything, including questions about their origins. So this study found that the children were secure, happy and comfortable in their families. For those who had various forms of contact threaded through their family life, it was not an everyday or highly salient feature. And those without contact had not been disadvantaged.

The meaning of contact for adoptive parents

In the children's best interests

All but one of the parents with contact were clear about its possible benefits and drawbacks. Its meaning for them, they told me, was that it was 'for the children,' primarily, to assist in their identity formation, to reassure them and keep links with their original family, to gain some information now or in the future, and to answer their children's questions about background circumstances and medical history.

The adopters with contact understood that their children might in future need to meet their birth mother, in their adolescent lifestage, and that contact might keep the door open for this. Preparation had primed them about the benefits of contact, and had informed them that meeting birth parents or having more information about them through letterbox contact could remove any perceived threat or any myths that they might believe about them, and for a few families this was the case. Adopters also realised that contact could supply much-needed information to reassure their children that the birth parents were still interested in them, and were alive and well (or not). This information, they felt, would reinforce that given to them by the social workers and foster carers. It was clear that their own needs and wishes about contact were secondary to those of their children.

The interests of birth mothers

Two families with contact thought that contact was more in the interests of the birth mothers; this was particularly because the birth mothers did not reciprocate

information (see below). But other factors were involved too, such as their fearful attitudes towards the birth mother, that she may sometime in the future be a threat by luring the child away or influencing the child in a negative way. Notably, these families to some extent had negative attitudes towards birth mothers and contact in general; the fathers were particularly negative. This gender difference will be explored later. Furthermore, somewhat predictably, these parents were less comfortable talking to their children about their backgrounds than the other eight sets of adoptive parents.

Adoptive parents without contact

The adopters without contact were also aware of its benefits. They told me that contact meant connections to the birth family, gaining information for their child and keeping links. However, these parents who had never experienced any contact were generally glad and relieved not to have it. This type of closed adoption was what they had been presented with, and over time they had become used to it. All the families commented on their sense of fulfilment at becoming parents. What had then become most important to them was the welfare of their children. It is evident from the findings that generally this group without contact have managed very well the extra hurdles of adoptive parenting. In doing so they have, in the main, accomplished a genuinely open adoption with comfortable communication between them and their children about their children's backgrounds. What started out for all but three families (who had some initial contact) to be a structurally closed adoption with no contact, became a communicatively open one. (Examples of open and closed adoptions are given below.) Consequently these families presented much as their counterparts who had contact – their children were well-attached and secure and had a good sense of themselves. Whilst they appreciated the benefits, they felt better off without it.

Letterbox contact

It would seem that letterbox contact might be an easier option than direct contact, and indeed this was the opinion of one family who had direct contact with their children's grandmother. However, letterbox contact raised many complex practical and emotional issues, as shown in the Findings. Adoptive mothers experienced anxieties about what to write – was it rubbing salt in the birth mother's wound, should they send photographs showing the children on holidays abroad? – as this might emphasise their own affluence and the birth mother's poverty. Children, particularly girls, on reaching puberty often questioned the letters and photos being sent to their birth mother and wanted them to stop.

Reflecting on the transcripts and literature I concluded that, as an alternative, perhaps face-to-face contact at significant lifestages can answer questions directly, and is facing up to imagined threats and anxieties, which are then usually removed. Adopters and the children see how sad, vulnerable and inadequate the birth mothers are. Even a one-event meeting can achieve this (Triseliotis et al. 1997: ch. 4, Howe and Feast 2000: 185). However, the reality is that whilst children and their adoptive parents may wish to meet, birth mothers are often too anxious, feel inadequate, and are ill-prepared and supported to do so, just as they are unable to respond to the adopters' letters. Much greater preparation and support is needed for birth relatives in the field of contact.

Lack of reciprocation of letterbox contact

It could be argued that the general lack of reciprocation hampered the families in their explanations to their children. Little and old information was common. But attitudes in general were open, empathic and comfortable, particularly about contact and the birth mother's loss and circumstances. So, as the findings and this discussion will make clear, families' openness of attitude was more important than the nature of the contact they had. This is in accordance with the findings of Triseliotis (2000), Howe and Steele (2004), and Brodzinsky (2005).

One family without letterbox contact tried very hard to initiate it. Tessa, adoptive mother of Sally, always knew that the birth mother did not want contact, but *she* was very keen to have it. It may be that she was in part influenced by her daughter's recent wish to address her growing identity needs with information from her birth mother. Sally was not interviewed, as she was currently having therapy and trying to trace her birth mother. Tessa had for nearly seven years sent information and photographs to be held on file for the birth mother, but these had never been collected or responded to. Sally requested the termination of contact and her parents agreed, feeling their daughter had suffered enough rejection. Instead of getting the reassurance of her birth mother's interest and love, the message to Sally was that she was unworthy of these.

This exemplifies the frustration and sadness experienced by adopters wanting reciprocation from the birth family. The adopters were, however, able to give their daughter reiterated positive information that her birth mother had visited her in foster care after her birth, demonstrating love and interest. But this limited and old information was not enough for Sally, who was now very angry with her birth mother

and transferring some of this anger to her adoptive mother. So contact had shaken attachments in this family.

Examples of open and closed communication

Both open and closed communication about adoption was found in my sample. Good examples of what is meant by open and closed communication are given by Brodzinsky (2005). Here are two similar examples, but from within my sample and practice.

(1) Open communication

The adoptive family of a young baby had little information about his background, and his birth parents had disappeared, so this was a traditional closed adoption. The parents brought him up in an atmosphere of openness, in which they mentioned factors about adoption from time to time and when an appropriate opportunity arose. They did not overdo this. Their child felt comfortable enough to ask questions of his parents. When he did the parents answered his enquiries, and if they did not know the answers they sought out information on the subject, whether it was adoption or anything else. They endeavoured to make links with his birth family through the post-adoption team, without success. They made the most of the small amount of information they did have; for instance, they visited his place of birth and explored the surroundings, and visited the university where his birth parents had met. As a result this child is comfortable about asking his parents any type of question. He trusts them and feels satisfied that they have told him all they know about his background, and that they will continue to help him to seek out information when he needs to do so. He knows that his adopters will support him in trying to meet his birth mother in the future, should he wish to do so.

(2) Closed communication

The second example is of a physically open adoption, but with closed communication. The family met once with the birth mother early in the placement and send her annual photographs and a newsletter. But it is stilted, brief and awkward, with little warm or generous communication between the two families. When their daughter asks questions about her birth family or other matters the adopters are evasive. So the child begins to feel uncomfortable about asking and eventually stops, possibly to her mother's relief. The child in turn may wonder what kind of story in her background is too awful to tell. Or she may build fantasies about her original family. So, although this is a structurally open adoption, in reality communication to the child about her birth family is closed.

Exceptional openness in parents with contact

Exceptional openness in communication and attitudes was found in nearly half the group with contact, who felt mainly positive about contact. The lack of reciprocal information from the birth family was the case or had become so for nearly all the adopters. However, the very positive families were better able to empathise with the birth family's inability to send information. These positive adopters seemed more able to be sensitive to their child's needs for information and to feelings about the birth mother, who is a part of the child. They were more empathic about the reasons for the birth mother's lack of response: that she may have had a lifestyle and upbringing of impoverishment on many levels, and that her feelings of sadness, guilt and inadequacy are not conducive to writing any kind of letter, let alone one to the adoptive parents of her lost child. These adoptive parents may have coped with and resolved losses of their own, enabling them to reach a better understanding of birth relatives' circumstances. They may be more confident parents, feel more 'entitled' and have more consistent attitudes to contact and more supportive and fulfilling relationships with each other. Moreover, this empathic attitude is more instrumental in talking with children about their background in a realistic yet sympathetic way, and likely to support positive views about the birth parents, which in turn will assist the children with feelings of selfworth. This is confirmed by Triseliotis (1991: 27), Fratter (1996) and Brodzinsky (2005).

Neil and Howe (2004: 235) assert that 'openness and the ability to collaborate are promoted by relatively undefended states of mind, ones which are capable of sensitivity, empathy, and the capacity to see, understand and reflect on how things look and feel from other people's points of view, including those of children and their birth relatives.' However, although it seems that openness of attitude is the essence of coping with, managing and using contact to best effect, there are as always other factors, and some that my study revealed are listed below.

Exceptional openness in partner-free mothers

The two parents who were most positive about contact were single (partner-free) adoptive mothers. One suspected that she or her former partner may have had infertility problems, and the other mother was unaware whether she was fertile or not. It is difficult to define why they are so much more positive. One factor is that their face-to-face contact is with siblings. But this varies between these two families. One sibling is in foster care and the child's social worker supervises the contact; the relationship between the two siblings is not a close one; and the adoptive mother is

concerned about longterm contact, as this boy's behaviour is challenging and may worsen. She also has letterbox contact with the birth mother; she has met the birth mother and found this most helpful for herself and her daughter. This is the one case of a nearly explicit link between contact and attachment.

The second family have contact with a younger brother placed in another adoptive family, and they have a much closer relationship with the sibling. There is also letterbox contact in this family with the birth mother, but the two mothers have never met; although the adoptive mother has been keen to meet, the birth mother's mental ill-health and other lifestyle issues have prevented this.

These two women, able to be more positive about contact than the other parents with contact, do not have the influence of a male partner, and fathers' feelings about contact are generally more negative (see below). It may be that just being single, independent, yet having good support from extended family and friends, and not needing to deal with a partner's possible infertility, are also factors which may have influenced these women's positive and wholehearted attitudes towards contact.

Openness without contact

The states of mind that promote openness were also evident in the majority of the parents without contact. Contact, one might think, would promote openness in adoptive families, while no contact would be a hindrance. This was not found to be so in the no-contact group; indeed most families had achieved open and comfortable communication with their children about their adoption and were aware that it is one of their most important extra tasks as adoptive parents.

However, two families could not wholeheartedly manage this. For example, one couple presented as warm and communicative during the interviews, and I observed their easy banter and communication and attunement with their children, whose other needs they seem to have met very ably. And both children were clearly secure, well-attached, confident and articulate, indeed a pleasure to interview. So perhaps the accomplishment of all the other tasks of adoptive parenting had compensated for their unease with properly explaining background circumstances (Triseliotis 2000).

This family's avoidant, closed and uncomfortable attitude to contact and explaining did not correspond with their more open and communicative style as a family, but it was clearly there on the subject of adoption. One consequence is the possibility

that their daughter Tamsin may want to find out more about her background, but will do it without their involvement and support. A family upset that the parents wanted to avoid may occur when Tamsin is in her twenties, when adopted women tend to search (Howe and Feast 2000).

Ambivalent and negative feelings about contact

Four couples with contact felt ambivalent about it, and all but one parent with contact also felt at least some degree of ambivalence. Two families with negative attitudes have been mentioned above (in The interests of birth mothers), and an ambivalent couple is described below (in Cognition v emotion).

All the parents without contact had reservations about it similar to their counterparts with contact, although they were aware of the benefits it might have with information. But for most of them contact was not a real and ongoing experience, so they were somewhat naive about it, and had not had to consider it profoundly, as their counterparts with contact had reluctantly had to do. However, three families with five children between them had experienced some initial contact. The singly-placed girl had experienced unreliable, inappropriate contact and had asked for it to stop. The other two children's birth parents had disappeared, and in the third case contact had drifted and stopped.

Other studies too have revealed that adoptive parents, whilst agreeing with contact in principle, also had negative and ambivalent feelings about it (Bell et al. 2001, Sykes 2000, Quinton et al. 1998: 59, and Fratter 1996). Lambert et al. (1990) found that although most adoptive parents agreed to contact in principle several retained mixed views about its appropriateness. Most found little positive in it and were relieved when it was not taken up. Quinton et al. found that initially most adopters were happy for their child to have minimal or irregular contact with people from their past. However, when asked if the parents *themselves* were in favour of continued contact, they expressed a different point of view. On the one hand they want to do their best for their child, and they understand the benefits of contact. On the other hand, although having great generosity of spirit, they sometimes feel dispirited by the incumbent nature of contact. While they accept that their child has another family who have lost this child, which is their gain, they do not always want to be reminded that this child was not theirs by birth.

Factors influencing attitudes to contact

(1) Agency influence

One factor which may have had a powerful influence in shaping attitudes for or against contact and openness in the adopters in both groups was the role and attitudes of the adoption social worker and agency. In my study most of the parents, including those who were most positive about contact, felt somewhat pressured into it. That is, they felt that they could not say no to it or they would not get a baby or child placed with them. Some of them (quoted in the Findings on contact) explained they were so desperate for a child that they would have done anything. As the sample was from my previous agency I can confirm that the ethos was indeed very much for openness and contact.

Furthermore, some of the evaluation sheets from the preparation groups criticised the overemphasis on contact and the birth parents' needs. The adopters felt that their own needs were often not considered. This was also found by Fratter (1996), Neil (2004), and Bell et al. (2001). Sykes (2000: 5) says that the social worker and her agency have a powerful influence on the adopters' attitudes to contact and that adoptive mothers have little voice on this issue compared with the larger amount of media publicity given to adult adoptees and birth mothers.

(2) Cognition v emotion

The tension between the cognition and the emotions of the adopters about contact explained the contradictory nature of some findings. An example of ambivalent feelings is Maggie and Ed, the adoptive parents of two teenagers Fiona and Dan, who have face-to-face contact with their grandma. His children think Ed is 'cool' about contact. In common with the rest of group, he is aware of the advantages and would never try to terminate the contact. He knows his children enjoy it, and get from it a sense of their other family and consequently of themselves. He and his wife are open, communicative and comfortable with talking to their children about their background and anything else; they feel a strong sense of entitlement and that the children belong in their family. Their account of contact says it is 'alright' but they also say they would have preferred a 'clean break'. Letterbox contact they felt would be easier. Their ambivalent feelings were the most obvious in the contact group.

(3) Unknown outcomes

A third factor in the parents' ambivalence was concern about the unknown nature of the ongoing contact and its unknown consequences. As Quinton et al. (1997: 411) assert: 'In our present state of knowledge it is seriously misleading to think that what we know about contact is at a level of sophistication to allow us to make confident assertions about the benefits to be gained from it regardless of family circumstances and relationships. At least in the case of permanent placements the social experiment that is currently underway needs to be recognised as an experiment, not as an example of the development of evidence-based practice. It is important that the effects of this experiment are properly evaluated.'

(4) Infertility

A fourth factor was the parents' emotional response to infertility. Practice wisdom and research might suggest that these adopters had not come to terms with their infertility (Reich 1990). But this did not seem to be so, as they could talk quite comfortably and openly about the loss of the children they had hoped to have born to them, and in the main were very able at explaining their children's backgrounds and circumstances. Other studies which inform and support this finding include Brebner et al. (1985), Reich (1990), and Stroebe et al. (2003).

(5) Initial experiences of contact

Three families without contact who had had some initial contact with the birth family all had reasons, it seemed, for not wishing to have contact now. In one family the birth parents had disappeared; the birth father in a second family had stopped sending information and the adoptive family decided to stop their letterbox contact with him. Both these families were relieved and grateful that contact had stopped. In a third family the parents and their daughter Laura, an older-placed child, decided that contact with the birth mother should stop because it was inappropriate and upsetting for Laura and for them. A fourth family, with three siblings placed now for ten years, were glad not to have contact because a previous placement had disrupted, partly due to the inappropriate, complex contact between the siblings placed with them and siblings who had remained with their birth mother.

(6) Age at placement

Five families without contact had placements of relinquished babies, and the norm in the late eighties and early nineties for this type of placement was no contact. The practice then was to use contact mainly to maintain existing relationships between children and their birth relatives. These children were usually in the older age

groups, as was found in the studies of Triseliotis et al. (1997), Quinton et al. (1998), and Neil (2002, 2004), and in this study. Neil (2002) found in her research with young children placed as babies, that where contact was arranged, the very fact that these babies had no emotional attachments to their birth mother or other birth relatives generally made the complex emotional business of contact much easier for all parties.

(7) Established family patterns

One adoptive mother without contact, and to a lesser degree the father, had initially been very keen to have contact, but the birth mother was not. These adopters now felt that it would be inappropriate and perhaps confusing for the children. It seemed they had become used to their no-contact status, it was familiar, and for the moment they did not wish to change it. This couple, like all adopters without contact, had friends who found contact difficult and upsetting for their children and themselves, which contributed to the feeling that they were 'better off without it.'

Adoptive mothers' feelings of desolation at the time of contact

The parents' ambivalence is further confirmed by the finding on adoptive mothers' sense of desolation, their feeling of being 'gutted', around the time of contact with birth relatives, particularly with birth mothers. Yet for most of the year they were positive about the benefits of contact and empathic towards the birth mother.

This other mother was accepted and referred to at other times, of course, but more so at the time of contact, when the adoptive mothers told the children what they were writing to the birth mother. Adopters often remarked that this information and photos was not really much to ask once a year, in return for the wonderful gift of their children. They were not paragons of virtue: sometimes they grumbled about the lack of reciprocation from the birth mother and about the extra chore of contact in the business of family life. But for the five, and possibly six, mothers in the study who had profound feelings of desolation, it was a complex matter of being reminded most strongly at the time of contact that there was another mother in the background and that she had given birth to their child, which they would dearly have wished to do.

One adoptive mother with direct contact felt that indirect letterbox contact would be easier for the emotional wellbeing of adoptive mothers. However, the other mothers with this form of contact felt just as devastated, so it was not the case that this

indirect form lessened the feeling. As Marie, quoted in the Findings, said, 'it takes you out of your comfort zone.'

Two mothers who experienced the feelings of desolation had placements of young babies, two had toddlers placed, and one other had a toddler and a nearly-four-year-old placed. Another family's child was seven but had been in placement for just over a year, so it was relatively early days for this mother. It was common among these mothers to remark that they felt that the child was theirs and belonged with them, and for the rest of the year they felt just like a normal family.

Reasons for the feelings of desolation

The feelings of desolation could perhaps be linked to the sadness and grief of infertility, not so much because it had not been tackled or resolved, more because it was a time of vulnerability when these issues came to the surface, as indeed they do in grief and loss, and have to be continually readdressed.

This raises the question whether the prospective adopters should have been more comprehensively prepared. However, all but one couple in my sample had written a history of their infertility and of their own, their family's and and their friends' feelings and attitudes at its different stages. This written history and the feelings it provoked were discussed with their adoption social worker during the home study. The findings demonstrate that these adopters had been open about and eventually had accepted their inability to have a child born to them. At the same time they recognised that their feelings of loss could re-emerge at other times, such as the child's adolescence. Furthermore, as was found in the identity section of the Findings, the adopters, in the main and for most of the time, had gained empathy for the birth family and could view them in a more positive light, through a fuller comprehension of their circumstances and from sharing this with their children. Stroebe et al. (2003) found that adoptive parents who were able to be open and reflective about their infertility had dealt as much as one can with the resulting loss and grief. Brebner et al. (1985) support this assertion.

So these complex and desolate feelings may have sprung not so much from infertility as from the fact that these adoptive mothers so profoundly felt this child was theirs in every way, something most of them mentioned. It was the renewed realisation that he or she had not actually been born to them that raised feelings of loss and grief, which some referred to as 'feeling gutted'.

Mothers without feelings of desolation

Five mothers with contact felt none of the feelings of despair demonstrated above. Nell, adoptive mother of two teenagers, said about contact,

It doesn't arouse any strong feelings cos as I say, Jacqui, I've never met her ... I just try to give her a little glimpse of what their life may be like with me ... I feel more like well, you know, these children are marvellous, I'm the lucky one here. It's that kind of feeling when I'm writing the letter. They feel like my children anyway.

I conceptualised and tried to identify what might account for the differences and similarities in attitudes. It may be that Nell feels less threatened by her children's birth mother and truly confident that she herself is the real mother. However, Nell admitted that for the first time she felt angry with the birth mother and that this had emerged from our discussion. Perhaps this is healthy, as a 'fight' rather than 'flight' reaction to thinking about the abuse.

The salience of birth mothers

Nell and her children enjoyed the face-to-face contact with the children's younger sibling and his family as well as a one-event meeting with the birth father. It is, however, an interesting and perhaps crucial fact that siblings and birth fathers somehow do not evoke the same powerful feelings as birth mothers. It is birth mothers who are salient, who most frequently search and are sought (Howe and Feast 2000, Thomas et al. 1999, Feast et al. 1998). Most children without contact in Macaskill's study (2002: 99) wished for contact with their birth mother. These studies and mine show that it is their birth mothers who are of most interest to adopted children. This seems more than just a gender issue, as the relationship between mother and child is profound and unique. So it is understandable that in this context birth mothers are highly salient to adopted children and can be a threat to their adoptive mothers, whilst at the same time the link and the loss of the child give the adoptive mother empathy with the other woman and her circumstances.

Mothers without contact: did they have feelings of despair?

It was one of the few radical differences between the two groups that none of the mothers in the group without contact expressed any feelings similar to those experienced by the mothers with contact around the time of contact. When those without contact were discussing what contact meant to them and might have meant if they had had it, their responses showed their awareness of its possible benefits

and drawbacks. All but one couple, including those who had initially wanted contact, were now relieved not to have it. Clearly one advantage was that they did not share the feelings of despair.

Fathers' attitudes to contact

Fathers with contact, whilst aware of its benefits, were found to be more negative and sceptical than their partners. No fathers showed any of the profound feelings of despair experienced by their wives. The role of men in pregnancy and birth, of course, is less physically and emotionally, and this may be partly why they do not have the feelings of despair. However, one father admitted to feeling jealous of the birth mother and worrying that his child might prefer her in the future, should they meet. It may be that another study concentrating on fathers' feelings might bring further, more profound feelings to light.

In the no-contact group too fathers were generally more negative about contact and birth families than the women. It might be assumed that without contact their feelings might be neutral; but perhaps it felt comfortable to conceptualise contact negatively since for most of them it had not been an option. And for those who had some earlier experiences of contact, these were perceived as detrimental.

Gender difference in attitudes

The adoptive fathers were generally less positive than their partners, and more matter-of-fact, pragmatic and stoical. This reflects the finding of a study at the University of St Andrews that men are less emotionally aware than women (reported in a Radio 4 news bulletin on 5 June 2005).

Other studies too have found that adoptive fathers are more cautious and negative, though Sykes (2000) found that the fathers became less cautious over time and that more than a third of the adoptive mothers, whilst remaining committed to contact, became stressed and less comfortable with it. Berry (1991) found that fathers were more resistant to contact than mothers. As discussed earlier, women may be more able to be empathetic to the birth mother's loss of her child, and thus more able and willing through contact to give something back to her. In my study the gender issues may be more obvious because in all the couples both male and female partners were interviewed, whilst in many similar studies the women partners outnumbered the men (for example in Fratter 1996, Mullender 1988, and Smith and Logan 2004).

Management of contact

The way in which contact is managed is also central to its outcome. To have some control over contact is a crucial factor, and this was both explicit and implicit in all the interviews with the adoptive parents. All parties in adoption have in some way lost control. The birth parents feel powerless over their child's removal, as does the child at the loss of her or his parents. Adopters too feel they have had little or no control over their inability to have a child born to them (Kaplan and Silverstein 1989). However, my study and those of Fratter (1996), Grotevant and McRoy (1996) and Smith and Logan (2004) found that, as their confidence in their adoptive parenting grows, at the same time the feelings of entitlement also grow; the making of the adoption order further assists feelings of control and of being parents in every sense apart from conception, which by now, for most of the time, is not an issue.

Most adopters feel that they now have control as parents and over contact. Those who have direct contact generally feel they have control over the supervision, venue and timespan of the contact. Indirect contact is also in the control of the adopters, apart from the wish to have reciprocal newsletters from the birth family when these have stopped or have never been forthcoming. These parents too could take control by stopping the indirect contact, but have chosen to continue as they believe it benefits their children. Most of the contact is on an informal voluntary basis, and where it is by order of the court it is often in terms of what is in the best interests of the child. A few of the adopters were not entirely clear about whether contact was voluntary or by a court order.

Smith and Logan (2004: 114) say, 'Adoptive parents' perceptions of the relationship between adoption, parenthood, ownership and control served to facilitate, rather than to impede the maintenance of direct contact.' Macaskill (2002) agrees. I found the same for both direct and indirect contact.

Conclusion

The meaning of contact

I conclude with one of the most interesting and salient similarities between the groups with and without contact. The meaning of contact for both parents and children in both groups was to get information. However, both groups had mainly old information, which the majority had used to good effect to explain their children's backgrounds and promote their well-formed identity. All but one of the parents, who were more articulate than their children, had reservations about contact. The

children took contact in their stride, whether it was face-to-face or letterbox; it was not an important or everyday part of their lives.

Research needs

More research needs to be carried out to examine the kinds of contact acceptable and beneficial to both adopted children and their adoptive and birth parents. It would be interesting, in five years time, to carry out further research with these two groups of parents and children to see what has changed and what remains the same. Another similar group could also be studied, to examine the same issues as this study, but also to discover if the implementation of the ACA 2002 has made any differences – for example, whether support to birth mothers with contact issues such as letter writing and one-off meetings with adopters, has assisted with issues dealt with above.

Attachment

Introduction

Attachment is so important for adopted children, and I had believed it would be promoted by contact, because of the additional interest and attention given by adoptive parents, and because of the reassurance and better sense of self promoted by the interest of the birth parents. This belief was encouraged by much of the literature, including Tizard (1977) and Fratter (1996), who say that attachment was not delayed or diluted by contact. Indeed this is the case, but as the debate in chapter 2 shows, caution is necessary as contact is not beneficial for all children all the time. For some children contact may trigger the previous trauma of abuse and may also impede attachment (Howe and Steele 2004: 220). While contact may not impede or delay attachment, that is not the same as promoting it, as I have found, since those children without contact had formed equally secure attachments. My six criteria of secure attachment, from comfortableness with physical proximity to food and feeling secure and belonging, showed that the children's attachments in both groups were secure, with the exception of one boy. I had expected to find that attachments in the group with contact were more secure than in the group with no contact, but this was not the case.

Children with and without contact

Table 6: Children with contact: age at placement

0-6 months	7-12 months	13-24 months	25-36 months	3-9 years
1	1	4	2	5

Table 7: Children without contact: age at placement

0-12 months	13-24 months	25-36 months	3-5 years	6-9 years
8	1	2	3	0

Table 8: Children with contact: probable type of abuse

None	Physical	Emotional	Sexual	Physical & emotional
2	-	4	Unknown	7

Table 9: Children without contact: probable type of abuse

None	Physical	Emotional	Sexual	Physical & emotional
8	-	Unknown	1, maybe 2 more	6 in 3 families

Baby placements in both groups

A good place to begin is with the ten baby adoptions, two in the group with contact and eight in the group without. These children settled well and became securely attached from the early days of the placement. Their adopters reported becoming attached to them when they were first described by the social worker; the attachment chemistry began, and was strengthened by seeing photographs of the baby, and further promoted by relating to the baby during introductions at the foster carers' home. The prospective adopters especially liked being smiled at, and often bonding was further promoted with this first smile from their long-awaited baby. When the baby gurgled and even when the baby was unwell, this need for closeness and comfort, this attachment behaviour, further strengthened the bonding, and for these ten babies their secure attachments were reinforced over the years. Good outcomes for baby adoptions are well documented elsewhere, for instance by Triseliotis et al. (1997), Grotevant et al. (1998) and Neil (2002).

The evidence was that these young babies had experienced much positive care from their foster carers, who had then introduced the children to their adopters and promoted the transference of their good attachments (Fahlberg 1988: 248). The two babies from the contact group are now six years old and securely attached. These two families have letterbox contact with their child's birth mother and siblings. Both families are very positive about it, feeling it has not been detrimental to their children's attachments. Indeed it may have had the benefit of assisting their attachments in the new family by promoting the realisation of belonging. Seeing or hearing from the birth parents often confirms their frailties and why they were unable to keep their children safe, and also substantiates that the adopters are their real family now. The two children of six were too young, of course, to answer complex questions about the interplay between contact and attachment or whether contact benefited their attachments. These themes will be further examined in the parents' section.

Toddler placements with secure and insecure attachments

Attachment histories were very different for the four children with contact placed as toddlers. Two of them were 17 months at placement, but here the similarity ends. Dan gained reassurance and identity from knowing and understanding his grandmother's initial and current interest in his life, and also from the information given about his birth mother. Dan came within Crittenden's comfortable secure classification (B), and still does. However, when interviewed he was not able to make any connections between contact and his attachment with his adoptive parents.

Keiron, also placed at 17 months, had an attachment history quite different from Dan's. His birth mother, whom he had lived with until he was nearly one, had misused drugs and alcohol, so she was often unresponsive and unavailable to him. Consequently Keiron was insecurely attached and developmentally delayed, presenting then as a frustrated and unhappy toddler. The inconsistent, unpredictable and insensitive parenting resulted in what Howe would term an ambivalently and insecurely attached child (Howe et al. 1999: 88).

However, interviewed at nine Keiron presented as securely attached. Like the majority of the children he was succinct and matter-of-fact in his answers to the contact questions. To Keiron contact meant something his mum could do if she wanted to, and with encouragement from her he had done a little letter to his birth mother this year, about how he was getting on. But the concept of the contact being connected to or benefiting his relationship with his adopters was beyond him.

Two other children in the contact group, placed as toddlers and of similar age, also initially came into the insecure category (A/C) and were far from straightforward placements. In the group without contact there were no toddlers placed under two; one two-year-old settled within two years, and a three-year-old, Oliver, has never become securely attached. Many prospective adoptive parents initially believe that a toddler cannot have been much affected by his or her poor start. But the preparation groups help them to consider the beginnings of attachment and trust-building that their children have to some degree missed, and help them understand the difficult behaviour of toddlers such as Keiron and Chloe.

Older-placed children

We come now to the children placed between two-and-a-quarter and nine years, and consider how they have fared in terms of attachment and contact, and their

perceptions of how these might be connected. Quinton et al. (1998: ix) in their study of older-placed children found that the first year of placement was the most vulnerable to placement breakdown, but in my study the children had all passed this vulnerable time. The majority had been in placement between three and nine years. The oldest girl Janet had had only two years in placement, and Dori aged eight had been in placement just over a year. Both girls had settled and become secure within the year, yet both had sad and complex backgrounds. Conversely, the other six older children had taken between two and nine years to trust and become securely attached. None of these children connected attachment and contact.

Age at placement and time taken to become securely attached

Five of the older-placed children with contact, nearly half, have taken a similar length of time to become secure as they had spent with their birth families and in foster placements, a time similar to their age at placement. These children had experienced poor nurturing, neglect and abuse, which caused their difficulties with emotional and social behaviour. For their adoptive parents this meant coping with children who were withdrawn or overactive or destructive, who show inappropriate superficial affection, who had delayed physical or cognitive development, and who understandably have immense difficulty trusting adults. Fiona, quoted in the Findings, reflects the background of most of the other children in this group.

Three children without contact had taken a length of time to become securely attached similar to their age at placement. Like those with contact, these children were older at placement and had complex, neglectful backgrounds. In contrast to those with contact, eight of the no contact children were placed as young babies and had all settled quickly and well, which supports the findings of Triseliotis (1997), Grotevant and McRoy (1998) and Neil (2004). So it would seem that it is not the lack of contact which has influenced the length of time these children took to settle; rather, their age at placement and the neglectful and abusive experiences before placement have resulted in insecure attachments. It took time and effort by the adopters to help these children to learn trust and become securely attached.

The backgrounds of these children with frightened and frightening birth parents did not enable the development of attachment, and the longer they experience the neglect and abuse, the more affected they often are (Howe et al. 1999: 123). So it is reasonable to expect that it might also take an equal amount of time to 'repair' the damage and to promote security and trust in a new family. The children in my study and their adoptive parents had survived and flourished, but it had taken time.

Dance and Rushton (2005), following up their earlier studies of later-placed children with similar ages and backgrounds to my group, spoke with the children and found that 'the message that comes across from the majority of young people whose placement was continuing is one of satisfaction with their current circumstances. Although many found the transition to the new home a difficult and often lengthy process, most had settled and saw themselves as a part of the family, and parent-child relationships were viewed as positive and strong' (Dance and Rushton 2005: 26). While their children reflected the similarities in time and difficulties, Dance and Rushton did not identify the similarity between the time it took to settle and become secure, and the time with the birth family.

The growth of attachment

The growth of attachment and openness is illustrated by Fiona. During her period of settling in her new family, her adoptive mother Liz said, 'I remember when they were both in the bath and we were chatting and I asked Daniel, do you love Fiona, and he said yes. So I asked her, do you love Daniel, and she said yes. I said, do you love *me*, and she said, no, I *like* you and I *will* love you one day. And she was *four*.' One can imagine the reaction of an adoptive mother, keen to find out if her child loves her and hearing such a profound statement from a four-year-old. This revelation of Fiona's shows her comfortableness with her new mum and her ability to be honest with her; the beginnings of trust were there. This is an example of a truly open and communicative family, and this openness was a common finding in both groups, with and without contact. It shows that although it took time for secure attachments to develop, they did develop despite the corresponding length of time for which these children had suffered neglect and abuse and consequently insecure attachments.

An older-placed child who became attached in a short time

The older-placed children in my study have complex, abusive backgrounds, and this factor is a high risk to placements. Analysis suggested which factors influenced the early secure attachments of the older-placed children, and why all the placements in this study have survived. Dori, who was older at placement, nearly eight, and had a complex abusive background, became remarkably secure after only a year. Analysis revealed an initially angry, destructive, anxious and confused child. Beneficial factors for her early attachment included: good foster care; adoption by a capable, warm, well-supported, partner-free woman; Dori's status as the younger,

resilient child in the birth family; and the fact that her brother was the child who took the brunt of his mother's neglect and abuse, and for longer.

Complementary personalities

The different personalities of children and their adoptive parents may complement each other, or may adversely affect each other. For example, Dori was a warm, confident and comfortable child who liked to be cuddled, and this was complementary to her adoptive mother's temperament. Dori responded well to her adoptive mother's ordered, calm, demonstrative, warm but firm handling of her angry and destructive behaviour. Conversely, if her new mother too had become angry with Dori's behaviour, or frightened and tearful, or out of control or too controlling, then Dori would not have been reassured, but instead would possibly have experienced similar feelings and fears to those she experienced with her birth mother, and might not have come to trust and love her adoptive mother as quickly as she did. Howe et al. (1999: 35) would concur, pointing out that some babies and children by their personalities bring out the best (or the not so good) in their parents' character, and vice versa.

Attachment and contact: children's perceptions of connections

All the children and young people with contact felt loved, secure, happy, belonging in their family, and mostly able to be open and communicative with their adopters. In essence, they all felt well attached, including those who had had early attachment difficulties. Many of them enjoyed contact and were very matter-of-fact about it; it was something which occurred once, twice or a few times a year, but not something which affected their day-to-day life or relationships as far as they were concerned. But even for the older children, the concept of contact assisting or benefiting their attachments with their adopters was not something they had considered until I asked them. Despite my prompting and encouragement on the subject, and although I put the questions as simply as possible, they could not grasp the concept. However, an implicit causal connection was maybe there, but not articulated, the essence of it being the interest their adoptive parents had taken in them and in the contact.

The children without contact, all above average intelligence, all with structurally open adoptions in varying degrees, had some understanding of contact in the context of adoption. All of them had thought about their birth families and siblings to some extent and had considered possibly making contact with their siblings or their birth mother in the future. Brodzinsky (2005) tells us that one hundred per cent of

adopted people think of searching for their birth families or for information about them at various times in their lives. However, none of the children in this group, in common with the children with contact, had really thought about contact as a way of promoting their attachment to their adoptive parents. My analysis showed that the comfortable communication about background was one of the essentials in their secure attachments. Even for those whose parents' good communication stopped short, or some way short, of adoption issues, other positive factors in attachment relationships had to a degree made up for this omission.

A case in which contact impeded attachment

A child who had experienced unreliable, inappropriate contact was Laura, the oldest girl in the study, who had also experienced emotional abuse and rejection by her birth mother. The birth mother had preferred her new partner and her child by him to Laura, and rejection has been found to be particularly damaging to children (Quinton et al. 1998). With the support of her adopters, who agreed that this contact was further damaging Laura's trust and self-esteem, the contact was stopped. Contact in this case had been detrimental to the early development of attachments between Laura and her new parents. Howe and Steele (2004: 220) say: 'Permanently placed children who have suffered severe maltreatment may be re-traumatised when they have contact with the maltreating parent. Children may therefore experience the permanent carers as unable to keep them safe. This will interfere with the child's ability to develop a secure attachment with their new carers.'

A year into her placement her adoptive mother had a baby boy, which reflected what had happened with her birth mother, so Laura was initially afraid that history would repeat itself. However, Laura's new family continued to demonstrate their attachment to her and she was given messages of love, worth and belonging with them. This experience perhaps gave her the ultimate trust in her adopters. Laura was quoted in the Findings, chapter 6.

A case in which contact would be inappropriate

Oliver (13), the boy with the serious attachment difficulties who is quoted and discussed elsewhere, describes himself as happy and having a good relationship with his parents and siblings. However, his parents and sisters describe him as distant and with attachment difficulties, but they are glad that he thinks he is happy. Although he has no contact with his birth family, neither do the other children in the group who *are* securely attached to their adopters.

Oliver had little concept of contact or how it might have helped his attachment with his adopters. Considering the abuse he had experienced and his anxious attachment, it was appropriate that Oliver did not and does not have contact with his birth mother (Crittenden 1995: 387). Howe and Steele (2004: 219) suggest that if for maltreated children such as Oliver contact appears to re-create the trauma, then contact whether direct or indirect should stop, at least in the short to medium term.

A case in which contact helped attachment

Keelan was placed as a relinquished baby of a few weeks old. He has no ongoing contact with his birth relatives but knows he has two older birth brothers and that his parents could not look after another baby. A letter from his birth mother explained this. Keelan had no real concept of how contact may have benefited his attachments to his adoptive family. However, he was able to read for himself and understand that his birth parents did care about him, and that he was not just 'given away' without thought for his future wellbeing. The written message was confirmed by his adopters, that he was indeed a worthwhile and lovable child. My analysis indicated that this early contact from the birth mother had founded a later, closer attachment between Keelan and his adopters. They implicitly recognised this, but had not made an explicit connection even with my prompting.

Adoptive parents with and without contact

Parents' attachment

All the parents (apart from Oliver's) felt securely attached to their children. They feel their children belong in their family, including Oliver. They have taken various lengths of time to form attachments, some beginning to bond during their period of introductions and others taking several years. All the parents including Oliver's are totally committed to their children, to being always there for them throughout their lives and to providing a secure base in times of future need such as illness, anxiety and loss.

They have achieved this by open comfortable communication, which enabled them do all the other extra tasks of adoptive parenting. Perhaps even greater closeness could be achieved in the two families who are the least comfortable with explaining their children's background; it is impossible to be sure. But what is clear is that all of these parents have done a very good job of parenting and enjoy doing it, including those whose children came to them with detrimental experiences of parenting. Their

children are now happy and functioning well, and enjoying life in a safe, secure family.

Who are the 'real' children?

All the parents in both groups feel that their adopted children belong in their family, including Oliver. The parents' perception was that the children were theirs in every way; they considered them in the same way as their birth children. In the group without contact there was also not the reminder of contact to accentuate the difference between adoptive and biological children. At the same time they recognised the difference, and most carried out the extra tasks of adoptive parenting very well. Like Tizard (1977) but in slightly different ways, I asked if they loved their adopted children in the same way as their home-grown children. Three families with contact and two without had children born to them, but considered their adoptive children as truly their children too. It seemed that the families merged and evolved, with parents and siblings perceiving themselves as a cohesive group and not one of 'real' and adoptive children.

Attachment and contact: parents' perceptions

All the adoptive parents with contact were aware of its benefits and drawbacks. Implicitly they were perhaps aware of the connection between contact and attachment, but explicitly this was a concept they had not really considered until I put it to them. It did not have the interest for them that it has for academics and researchers.

For the parents without contact now who had experienced it in the past, I examined their perceptions of contact and no contact and its effects on their attachments. For those who had no experience of contact, I examined their perceptions of what effects contact might have had on their relationships with their children.

In general, parents without contact had little or no concept of how contact might have assisted with feeling closer to their children, although they appreciated the usefulness of information. Their attachment might have been further assisted through the sharing of information, or might not have been.

All but one family without contact were relieved not to have it. It was not considered beneficial by the three families who initially had some form of contact which stopped, and this was so in Oliver's family, who had experienced direct contact with siblings

in a previous placement which disrupted. Obviously these negative experiences had influenced perceptions.

Positive effects of contact on attachment

The parents of Keelan discussed above, in common with four of the five families with baby placements, had implicitly made tentative links between contact of some kind and attachment. One factor was receiving a positive letter from the birth mother which greatly helped with explanations and seemed to 'draw them closer'. A second was gaining photos and updated information for the children's growing needs. A third factor was the wish of the adoptive mother to meet the birth mother in order to gain a sense of her and some information to pass on to their children. So in a very tentative way and perhaps with further prompting, some connection between contact and attachment might have been made.

An example of a parent who became aware of the connection between contact and attachment, is Una, the mother of Dori discussed above. Una was clear that whilst her involvement and interest in the contact between her daughter and her older brother might maintain and perhaps build the relationship between the siblings, it was neither meaningful for nor had it helped her attachment to her daughter. However, Una was able to appreciate that the meeting between herself and Dori's birth mother, combined with letterbox contact, had been beneficial to the attachment, by removing the threat of the birth mother, by giving Una greater understanding of the birth mother's frailties, and by promoting greater closeness with Dori, particularly after Dori saw the photos of her two mothers together. Enabled by my questions Una was thus able to link contact and attachment. The greater openness and communication between Una and Dori helped both of them feel more accepting, comfortable and at ease with each other, particularly on the subject of her birth mother and background. This is in accordance with Triseliotis (2000) and Brodzinsky (2005).

Attachment, contact and anger

The adoptive parent most wholehearted for contact, Nell, was articulate about her two teenage children's early difficulties in trusting and attaching to her over seven years. Tentative connections were made between contact and attachment, but often with my prompts. She could conceptualise the important link which contact promoted between her children's past, present and future, which in turn involved a positive effect on their attachments in their new family. But Nell's anger at the birth

mother's very serious abuse of the children emerged for the first time during her interview; while a growing connection was made, anger also emerged.

Other adopters, especially the fathers, had always been aware of this anger. What might have helped them feel more connected with and positive about the birth mother, would have been meeting her and having some reciprocal information from their letterbox contact. Una above had the opportunity to gain these benefits, but the other adopters had not. This lack of collaboration by the birth parents, especially fathers, was also found to be the case in the studies of Logan (1999) and Howe and Steele (2004).

Negative effects of contact on attachment

The parents of Laura above questioned their decision to support her in terminating contact with her birth mother. Their main concern was Laura's wellbeing, but they worried over closing a door that she might need or want to open in the future. Parents and perhaps particularly adopters want to do their best for their children and make decisions that are in their best interests (Tizard 1977: 247). However, taking all factors and circumstances in Laura's case into consideration, I think that they did make a good judgement about assisting their growing attachments and Laura's trust in them. In this family contact was perceived as a probable impediment to the formation of attachment. This was implicit rather than explicit in the family's narratives; explicit was their open, comfortable communication as a family.

By contrast, Sally's parents hold particularly positive and enthusiastic views on contact, trying unsuccessfully for years to initiate contact, until Sally asked them to stop. Unlike Laura, Sally has no memories of her birth mother. My analysis showed that these adopters may have over-idealised and over-empathised with the birth mother, emphasising how much she loved Sally and cared about her, heightening their daughter's expectations of her. The repeated disappointments resulted in her becoming angry with both her birth and her adoptive mother. The realisation of being given away, combined with her more mature understanding of the complex issues in adoption, contributed to her teenage angst. Thus adopters who have been enthusiastic and strived for contact are left disappointed and with an unsatisfied, angry daughter, who may again experience the rejection of her birth mother if her search is unsuccessful. The urge for contact in this family has currently shaken attachment relationships.

Negative influences on attachment

My analysis identified many negative influences on Oliver's attachments.

- After Oliver's allegation of physical abuse, Oliver's father, to safeguard himself, distanced himself from his son and may have unwittingly contributed to Oliver's already insecure attachment pattern. Keck and Kupecky (1995: 27) with regard to insecurely attached children tell us, 'The child's unconscious motive is to keep the adults out of their innermost thoughts and out of their lives.'
- Oliver's parents were uncomfortable with explaining background information to their children.
- Oliver may feel bad, unworthy and unlovable because he had taken responsibility for the abuse by his birth family.
- His sense of trust in adults remains impaired.
- His parents had not had the opportunity of attending preparation groups. My previous MSW research (Dally 1988) found that adopters without this opportunity had more difficulty in explaining adoption issues to their children.

However, these were not 'closed' parents; lifestory books were available to their children; they responded to the children's questions about their birth family; and they were pleased to take part in my research, hoping that the discussions might promote openness. Their concerns over Oliver's detrimental background engendered ambivalence about explaining it. Oliver's mother was concerned that opening up the past might cause further damage, while his father felt tentatively more positive about openness. So these parents had little concept of contact promoting attachment.

Attachment and contact: conclusion

Although the adopters sometimes implicitly had some sense of the connection between contact and the attachments with their children, they did not have a strong concept of it, any more than their children did. According to most of the literature I have reviewed, from Tizard (1977) to Howe and Steele (2004), for many children but not all, attachment is not negatively affected by contact; however, the studies do not explicitly address how contact is perceived by adoptive children and parents to promote attachments, in the way that my study has done.

Attachment: conclusion

I was struck by the similarity between the two groups with and without contact. One similarity was the ordinariness of the things the children loved about family life, such

as a clean vest or nightie, food, a hug, and being able to ask their mum and dad anything. Their pleasure and contentment created an almost visible aura; the very ordinariness was extraordinary.

A second similarity was the secure attachments. In the contact group all the children interviewed were now securely attached, although many of these children had presented as insecurely attached when first placed. In the group with no contact all but one boy were securely attached. However, in this group five families had the benefit of eight children placed as babies.

In all families in both groups there was an awareness of the main benefit of contact, namely information for the children. In both groups there was a general lack of awareness of contact promoting attachment. However, this is a complex concept, one which might be difficult to acknowledge, and not of central interest to adopters or their children, who just want to be a family. But there was some tentative awareness and a little more explicit awareness in the group with contact, mainly through my prompts.

Identity

Introduction

This section is about the sense of identity of the children in both groups. I discuss first the good sense of identity of the children without contact, then of the children with contact. In each case I examine the importance of good parental communication, and also give an example of less secure identity. Then I look at older girls' wishes for reunion, and at boys' comparatively sanguine attitudes.

Second, I discuss the adoptive parents' views of their children's identity, looking at similarities and differences between the two groups, the importance they attach to information, some difficulties they have with disclosure, and an example of difficulty in understanding a child's poor identity. Then I examine the connections they make with contact, the effect of the level of contact, and the effect of information and communication on identity, especially in families without contact.

Children's identity

Good sense of identity

The children in both groups (with one exception in each group) were found to have a very good sense of their identity. They also have good attachments, as shown by the findings, and we are informed that it is the quality of the children's relationships and attachment to their primary carers which contributes to the core of identity formation (Triseliotis 2000: 92).

My findings also demonstrated that the children possess the three key features that contribute to social and personal identity. These features, according to Triseliotis (1980: 136), are: 'feeling wanted within a secure environment, as a result of a warm and caring relationship within the adoptive family; having knowledge of personal and family history; and being perceived as a worthwhile person within the community. (This last factor is likely to assume greater importance as children move through to adulthood and separate from their adoptive family, especially children from black minority groups placed transracially).' These key features will be further discussed below.

Children without contact

It might have been presumed that these children, without the information and the confirmation of their birth family's interest which contact can provide, would have a less positive sense of identity. But this was not so.

The findings show that indeed the majority of these children did not have the advantage of directly gaining information that would have assisted in forming their identity, as have children raised in their original families. With that advantage they could have seen for themselves whom they looked like and from whom they got their personalities, traits, talents and skills, and these perceptions would have been continually reinforced by family and friends. So these children needed to get this vital information from their adopters. But it seemed that these children had indeed been given enough information, and had received enough promotion of their sense of being a lovable and worthwhile person, to achieve a positive identity.

An example of good identity without contact

Nat was secure in belonging in his adoptive family. He had a good sense of himself and was comfortable about asking his parents questions about his background, and knew that they had told him everything they knew as well as trying to gain more information for him. Nat told me that having contact might have provided him with information and photographs of his birth mother. So although he did not explicitly make connections between contact and identity, the implication could be found in his narrative. For example, when asked whom he thought he looked like, he answered, 'Maybe my birth mum, that's why I'd like a photo.'

Parental communication and identity

Positive identity formation for Nat and most of the other children without contact was gained through their adopters' comfortable and open communication of the background information received from the adoption agency and foster carers. In this respect there is little difference between the children without and with contact, as many of the children with contact also have no reciprocal information from their birth relatives. As discussed earlier, Sally, one of the children with no contact, had asked her adopters to stop sending information for it just to lie on file for her birth mother, viewing this as a lack of interest and a further rejection. The other members of group without contact do not encounter these issues and have a positive sense of themselves.

An example of poor identity without contact

In contrast, Oliver, quoted in most sections as he was the exception, had a poor sense of identity, shown by his avoidant and negative responses to the identity questions, which were answered with ease by the other children. He was what Erikson (1963: 247) might deem to be a confused and different boy, rather than unique and whole like the other children in the study. Oliver was unable to make any connection between his identity, background information and contact.

Many factors had influenced his 'spoiled' identity:

- Uncomfortable communication with his adopters.
- His distant, uneasy personality.
- His anxious attachment and consequential behaviour, such as destructiveness, lying, and showing inappropriate affection.
- The fact that he was not an easy boy to like or love or communicate with.

But his distant behaviour was the most destructive factor of all to the attachment relationship and consequently to his identity. Quinton et al. (1998: 11) found that adopters could often cope with the challenging behaviour of their children, but distant behaviour was the most destructive and gave poor parental satisfaction.

Oliver's conviction that he belonged in his family and that they were totally committed to him, and his possession of information on his background, gave him two of the key factors for good identity formation and probably contributed to the charming and positive parts of his identity.

Children with contact

The analysis suggests that all the children with contact (except one) have a very good sense of themselves. The children had been able to ask their parents about their backgrounds, with varying degrees of comfortableness. Their adopters had given them age-appropriate background information, which had been added to as the children matured, developed and were able to understand more complex information. Other factors which may have contributed to their sense of themselves were: their own memories of their birth families, both positive and negative; siblings' memories, which they could discuss and compare together; pre- and post-adoption preparation such as lifestory work; and of course the information they gained through contact. Children about whom letters and photos are sent to their birth relatives, know that their birth relatives request the information and remain interested in them, and this assists their sense of worth, even when the contact is not reciprocated.

Parental communication and identity

Table 2 (in chapter 6) shows that only a few of the children with contact got any up-to-date information from their birth families, as the letterbox contact was one-way (the norm in most studies mentioned earlier). So to a great extent the forming of the children's identity had been up to the adoptive parents, by means of their own secure attachments with their children, and by communication of information from the Form E, from social workers and foster carers, from letters (if any), and from the contact itself. The majority of the children felt that their parents had carried out a good job of explaining their adoption and its circumstances.

Improvement in sense of identity over time

Good and bad experiences in eleven-year-old Trinnie's past had influenced her earlier sense of identity. On placement she presented as a happy but sometimes disturbed little girl. Disclosure of past experiences to her adopters helped her remove her feelings of responsibility for neglect and abuse and to transfer responsibility to the adults concerned. Her initial lack of trust and low self-esteem began to improve as she developed a more positive inner working model (IWM). Nearly eight years on, my analysis showed that Trinnie clearly had a positive and realistic sense of self, physically and socially, which incorporated the features outlined above by Triseliotis (2000: 90). She was also a child who had enough information and memories of her past to satisfy her, for now. Her awareness of having her birth mother's beautiful skin and eyes and her birth father's musicality mixed comfortably with the personality and skills of her adopters, who she knows will support her in a future meeting with her birth mother.

Less secure identity: Chloe

Chloe is less secure about her identity than the other children, apart from Oliver in the no-contact group. Her mother, like two of the families without contact, was not comfortable with the initial task of explaining origins and had not used opportunities to explain the more difficult information. So it may be that other factors assisted in her positive identity formation, and she has many positive factors; for instance, she believes that she is loved and belongs, and she is academically gifted and proud of this, which is reinforced by her mother's and her teacher's praise, encouragement and treats. Chloe is given messages that she is a worthwhile person and this helps her form a positive sense of identity.

Chloe's identity was a mixture of positives and negatives, as shown by her quotes in the Findings. The detrimental side, which to a lesser degree 'spoiled' her sense of identity, could perhaps be attributed to the partial loss of her adoptive father through divorce, to her mother's inability to spend much time with her (she was a busy fulltime working single mother), and to the competing needs of her attention-seeking younger sister. The writings of Goffman (1969) on role theory and 'spoiled identity', cited in Triseliotis (2000: 91), explain how some of our roles in everyday life are gained from the views and attitudes of others as we come to see ourselves through their eyes. We may consequently perceive ourselves as 'best' or 'second-class' or 'bad' or 'dull'. He suggests that a sense of 'spoiled identity' usually develops from being given consistently negative messages by those around us.

Girls' wish to meet their birth mother

The three older girls with contact and four without, who had a reasonable amount of information about their background, felt it was important for them to meet their birth mother in the future to gain further information and (for some of them) to refute their concerns about inheriting some of her negative traits. My analysis showed that the girls had enough information to prevent them from idealising their birth parents; that is, they all knew that their birth mother was unable to care for them because of alcohol and drug misuse or mental health issues, or could not keep them safe. They felt different now; they had been raised in loving, secure, safe and reliable ways in their adoptive families, and had more educational and leisure opportunities and a good support network of family and friends – things that they would not have experienced in their birth family, positive factors in identity formation. They were very clear about how much better off they were in their adoptive families physically and emotionally, than they would have been if they had remained with their birth families. They had secure relationships and had developed a positive identity (Rutter 1995: 84).

Boys' sanguinity

The majority of boys in both groups were much more sanguine and had a very good sense of themselves, and although some said they might want to meet their birth mother in the future, it was not with the intensity felt by girls. Howe and Feast (2000: 158) found that women on the whole were much more curious than men about searching and about meeting their birth mother. They agree with my earlier reflections that this gender difference is probably connected with being a woman and with pregnancy and medical issues. That boys were much more sanguine than girls was also found by Thomas et al. (1999: 29).

Children's identity: summary

Apart from Oliver and Chloe, all the other children in both groups had a positive sense of identity, gained from the open and comfortable communication of information about their background by their adopters. All the children had a composite sense of their identity, composed from their birth relatives, adoptive families, friends and teachers. One other girl had possibly some identity issues because of unresolved concerns over her birth mother who had disappeared; but these were being addressed with professional support, and this girl showed positive features of having a reasonably good sense of herself. Most of the older children made connections between identity and contact when prompted by my questions.

Adoptive parents' views on children's identity

The importance of information

A keen awareness of their children's need for information about their background was evident in all the adoptive parents with contact. They had somewhat different levels of understanding about why this was so important. But there was a consensus that it helped their identity formation, and this in the main was their reason for agreeing to have contact – for their children's sake. As Trinnie's mother said, 'We do it for the children really ... We don't often get a lot of things back, but one snippet of info can be a lot.'

Adopters were considered in giving positive and realistic information about origins to their children. They all held the strong belief that it was the children's right to know about their backgrounds and have appropriate contact with their birth relatives. The adoptive mother of Trinnie was explicit about her daughter's self-esteem being helped by this knowledge and contact. Her father recognised that her identity formation is promoted by it, as it is by meeting her sister, when she is able to see for herself their similarities of looks and personalities. So although the family are aware of contact having benefits for the children's sense of identity, in common with other parents in the group, it is not something which they have considered profoundly.

Difficult information

Trinnie's parents were seriously considering the difficult information that they will have to tell the children sometime and somehow in the future. They intend to use the advice on explaining difficult backgrounds given in Melina (1989: 100). They also have the support of their local After Adoption team. A case had been brought

to court alleging that the death of a sibling of Trinnie's was the birth mother's responsibility. This was publicised, so the children could find out this information by other means. Trinnie and her two younger siblings are aware of their younger sister's death and have visited her grave, so the beginning of the story has been told.

How this dreadful information may affect them and their identity depends on a number of complex factors. However, it is appropriate that they hear this story from their parents rather than others. It is hoped that these children's positive identity and secure attachments, as well as the excellent support and love of their parents, will help them cope with this information.

Families who struggle with giving information

Considering Trinnie made me reflect how two other families struggled with disclosing information, although their children have a fairly simple background story (for instance, about a young teenage mother who was not ready or able to be a mother). These families, one with and one without contact, were clearly uncomfortable with explaining and had not managed the explanations appropriately. This creates concern for the children's future identity, particularly that of the girls, who may be (as discussed above) more curious, questioning and angry than their brothers, especially around adolescence. As found in this study, it is the openness of attitudes and comfortableness with communication that are more salient than the seriousness or difficulty of the background information.

Understanding poor identity

It is extremely difficult for Oliver's parents to understand his identity issues. The negative formation of his identity was influenced by the interplay of many different and complex factors. His parents Diana and John were to some degree aware of these influences, including his attachment difficulties and their own uncomfortableness with giving him background information. Furthermore, Oliver had a 'rosy' picture of his birth mother, who had neglected and abused her children, particularly Oliver as the only boy. So while aware that the difficult information would need to be revealed to the children, the parents were unsure when and how to explain it. They had concerns that Oliver might go 'either way'; that is, it might enable him towards a more realistic understanding of what had happened to him, and help him see that it had not been his responsibility as he was only a little boy; conversely, fear of opening old wounds and of possibly more challenging behaviour prevented them being open with him. They had implicitly made some links between

contact, information and identity where Oliver's siblings were concerned, but in Oliver's case they restricted his access to his lifestory book. Consequently they were giving him the message that they were uncomfortable with the information and with answering his questions. Oliver's background is inestimably complex and his behaviour very challenging.

Contact and identity: parents' perceptions

The parents' concepts of the connections between identity and contact are shown by the above examples. The adoptive parents who have some form of contact have made the links between the two, but not in any profound way, rather in a matter-of-fact way and prompted by my questions. However, they all felt that contact was important for their child's sense of self and for the possibility of a future meeting or meetings.

Unreciprocated contact

Most parents were disappointed and frustrated by the lack of reciprocation by the birth family, and were powerless to change this, but kept trying. An example is Dinah, the mother of Chloe discussed above. Responding to the question on the effect of contact on Chloe's identity, Dinah said, 'I don't think I've really noticed it.' She was clearly disappointed and annoyed that *she* sent information and photographs annually to the birth parents and both sets of grandparents, but this was not reciprocated, despite repeated requests for photographs, which her daughter had asked for. Dinah felt that reciprocal contact would have had some meaning for and effect on Chloe's identity. However, as it was only one-way she could not make any connection between Chloe's identity and contact, except that the maternal birth grandmother had shown an interest by sometimes chasing up the contact (though this was also another irritation). So Dinah felt negative, unempathic, uneasy and annoyed about the birth parents; contact was always her responsibility, and, she believed, was in their interests rather than in those of her daughter.

Effect of degree of openness on outcomes

Grotevant et al. (1998), in a large American study of 170 families in which they interviewed at least one child in each family, found that the children's self-esteem, comfortableness in asking questions about their origins, and good social and emotional adjustment, were not governed by the same level of openness in the adoption – that is, by the level of contact in the adoption. They also found that the children were not confused or had damaged self-esteem, which refutes the assertions of critics of openness. However, they went on to point out that 'neither do

these findings support the hypothesis that more openness enhances these outcomes. Future research must address under what circumstances openness in adoptive relationships is prudent and how to communicate available information about birthparents to adopted children in ways that are beneficial to their current and future development' (Grotevant et al. 1998: 102). This study somewhat supports my findings and is the only study of which I am aware which examines families without contact, though they were a very small group. This seems to be a large gap in the British research when we consider that all the studies in my literature review (chapter 3) concentrate on families who have contact with the birth relatives.

Effect of information and communication on identity

Central to positive identity formation is good, ongoing, positive and honest communication between adopters and their children. Nan and Ben, the parents of Nat discussed above, though not effusive, were obviously comfortable, open and communicative in explaining background issues to their children. Their son had been given his story over the years, that his birth parents were two students who were not ready to be parents, to any child, which he had accepted and been satisfied with. Recently Nat had asked his parents to try to find out more information and get a photo of his birth mum. So the post-adoption worker was contacted, could not trace the birth parents, but will try again in the future. These efforts had meantime satisfied and reassured Nat, as had their suggestions that it was highly likely that he resembled his birth parents in looks and academic ability. So although Nan and Ben were not explicit about the connections between identity and contact or information, implicitly they were aware of their children's right to and need for information, in an ongoing way, and had made efforts to gain additional material, including a photograph for Nat – so gaining his trust, which is part of identity formation.

Importance of a photograph of the birth mother

It is evident that for adopted children with or without contact a photograph of their birth mother is very important. This confirms the finding that 'the centrality of physical identity for many who search is to see what she looks like' (Triseliotis 2000: 90) and Howe and Feast (2000: 185). Even for those children with indirect contact who do have a photograph, it is usually old, as was the case with Trinnie, Chloe and Kate, who had requested up-to-date photos but whose requests were not met. Howe and Feast (2000: 4) state that knowledge of one's roots is essential for a positive identity, and this is reinforced throughout their research, and here too.

Good communication without contact

The adoptive parents without contact had promoted the development of their children's well-formed sense of identity through good communication. Even Oliver's identity was not as negative as one would imagine and his parents had been successful in promoting his siblings' self-esteem.

It might be assumed that without contact these children would have a less positive identity, but as the findings showed, this was not so. What all these children had experienced was living in a family where they were securely attached and in which they knew they belonged – which is one of the core factors in the formation of a positive identity (Triseliotis 2000). They also had, in the main, parents who communicated easily and comfortably with them and of whom they could ask even the most difficult questions.

In other words, although these families had structurally closed adoptions without contact, communicatively these families were open, and the parents had given their children, in an ongoing, age-appropriate way, the information they had about their background. They had made the most of the information they had, and often attempted to gain more, or had left information and photos on file for the birth parents if they should make contact. Therefore the children could see that their adoptive parents could be trusted to tell them about their background, and to make what contact they could in order to form and inform their children's identity. Brodzinsky (2005) also found that it was this openness of communication which helped the children's attachment and sense of identity, rather than the amount of contact between the two families.

Identity: conclusion

What struck me most about the children in both groups was their equally well-formed identity, since I had always believed that one of the most salient reasons for contact was to provide information to promote the children's identity formation. But clearly this was not essential. The essence of their well-formed identity, in both groups, was that indeed they got the necessary information, but it was mainly from their adopters.

A notable contrast with attachment was that the children, and particularly the parents, made easy connections between identity and contact. However, a connection between identity and contact is easy to see from photos, which they all

had, and from written information. On the other hand, though attachment could be observed between the children and their parents, connecting the promotion of attachment with contact was much more difficult emotionally, physically and practically.

Discussion of the findings: conclusion

The outstanding conclusion is the overwhelming sense of good outcomes for all these children. This includes the two with attachment and identity issues, whose families have made a lifetime commitment to them despite the many challenges.

Like most practitioners, I believed that contact, with its advantage of giving information to adopters and children, would promote attachment between the children and their adopters and would promote the children's identity formation. Until this study I had not been fully aware of the power of good communication by trusted, loving adoptive parents.

This study has found that the essence of the children's secure attachments and positive sense of identity is the open, comfortable communication about background between adopters and children, combined with the adopters' profound interest in and commitment to their children. That such secure attachment and so positive a sense of identity were found in both groups was remarkable. I was much exercised and surprised, as I expected to find many significant differences in the children's attachments and sense of themselves – but the opposite was true.

Other research reviewed and referred to throughout the study supports many of my findings, such as the overall awareness of adopters about the benefits of contact, but also the reservations that many had, and their wish sometimes that they did not have contact. This study also found that at least half the adoptive mothers with contact experienced deep feelings of despair at the time of contact. Like the other studies reviewed, I would recommend further research to examine the factors which enable those families with initially insecurely attached children to make good attachments and identity. I would also like to see further research into the advantages of no contact, such as the freedom from despair of mothers without it, and would like to apply the findings supportively to those families with contact. More support and preparation are clearly necessary for dealing with the emotional impact of contact.

Implications for practice and policy, in the light of the Adoption and Children Act (2002), are in the next and final chapter.

Chapter 8

Conclusions and implications for practice

Aims of the research

In my sample of 19 families, ten with contact and nine without, my main aim was to understand the significance and meaning of contact or of no contact for these adoptive families. The existence of contact in its different forms – direct or indirect – fluctuated across time and family. Direct contact took a number of forms, from fortnightly face-to-face meetings with birth parents, to face-to-face meetings with a grandmother twice a year, to two or three or more meetings each year with siblings. Indirect letterbox contact was also diverse, and nearly all one-way from the adopters to the birth family, varying between one brief annual letter of information to a birth mother, to letters once or twice a year which contained photographs and notes and drawings from the children, sent to birth parents (sometimes living with new partners), grandparents, and siblings. This was not the be-all and end-all of contact; it changed and shifted and was exceedingly complex practically and emotionally. Some of the families without current contact had also experienced contact in the past.

It was my aim to analyse how contact is perceived and considered by the children and their adoptive parents and its impact on everyday family life and relationships, to examine their perceptions of identity formation and attachments, to compare my findings with those of other researchers for similar supportive findings, and to identify gaps in the research.

Structure of this chapter

In this chapter I begin by briefly discussing the overriding conclusions from the research and my own feelings and assumptions about contact. Next I outline my findings, and then look at the essence and aims of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (ACA), concentrating particularly on those aspects of it that are central to my study, namely contact and information searching. The final section will identify and discuss the implications for practice highlighted by my research.

Main conclusions from the research

In both groups, with and without contact, the children were securely attached and had well-formed identity. As an adoption social worker and great believer in and advocate of contact over my 20 years of practice, I had expected to find notable differences between the two groups, namely, that the children with contact would be more securely attached and have a much better sense of their identity than those children without contact. But contact made little difference to these most important elements of their lives. The meaning of contact for adoptive families was to gain information and to keep the door open for possible future meetings. The parents felt it was in their children's best interests and that they should do it for the children. But it was hard work for the adoptive parents, practically and emotionally – writing letters to the other mother, worrying over what to say and what to leave out, choosing appropriate photos, and ultimately having to face the fact, of which contact was a reminder, that their child had not been born to them.

Those in the no-contact group could also appreciate the advantage of getting information. With one exception, those without contact were relieved not to have it, and this included those who had initially experienced some form of contact which the birth parents had stopped, and one case in which the child and adopters decided it should end. The children felt that they did not need it; they had a mum and dad who gave them all the information they had about their background and who would support them in seeking a future meeting with their birth mother or siblings.

Findings

My research is unique in examining two groups of adoptive families, one with contact and one without in the context of family relationships and children's identity. The outstanding finding was the similarities between the two groups in the study. Contact or its absence, it seems, did not affect the children's secure attachments or positive identity formation. All but one child were securely attached. All of the children except one had well-formed identity. The most important influence on identity and attachment was the comfortable, open communication between the children and their adoptive parents.

My research also uniquely identifies three other components: the despair felt by many of the adoptive mothers at the time of contact; and the anger felt by teenage girls across both groups, who felt angry with their birth mothers, while boys were

sanguine, whether or not they remembered abuse; and the similarity between the age at placement and time to become secure.

Whilst taking into consideration that my sample was selfselected and that another sample might have produced different findings, I hope that practitioners will consider these findings helpful, and be mindful of them when considering contact in relation to attachment and identity, and keep an open mind on contact, seeing each family and its members as a unique entity.

In addition to the surprising findings above, other salient findings were these:

- Children in both groups were interested in their birth siblings, and if they had any unknown siblings whom they might wish to contact in the future. Those who had contact enjoyed seeing their brothers and sisters. Children considered the siblings with whom they lived to be their 'real' brothers or sisters, rather than their (known or unknown) biological siblings living elsewhere, who were more like cousins or friends.
- Both groups shared similar reservations about contact, contrary to my belief that those with contact would have held more overwhelmingly positive views and those without would have been more neutral.
- Adoptive fathers in both groups had more negative feelings than adoptive mothers towards contact and birth mothers.
- None of the mothers in the group without contact experienced the feelings of despair suffered by their counterparts in the group with contact; the mothers without had no contact to trigger off these feelings.
- In all the families in both groups there was an awareness of the main benefit of contact, namely information for their children.
- In both groups all the children and all but one adoptive mother (who made a tentative link between contact and attachment) were unaware of the view that contact might promote attachment within the adoptive family.
- Letter-box contact was not an easy option.
- Some children had come to realise that they were now different from their birth parents and some worried that they might have inherited their birth parents negative traits.
- Children and parents in both groups were able to make connections between information and news gained by contact, and identity, which could contribute to the formation of identity. This connection indeed is more visible than the complex, emotive, intangible link between contact and attachment.

- There were good outcomes for all of the children, including the two children with identity and attachment difficulties, irrespective of contact. All of these children knew they were loved and worthwhile and that their families would always remain committed to them.

Generally contact or its absence had not undermined any of the placements in my study. In one the contact was inappropriate and was stopped at the wish of the child and with the support of her adopters. Another child who had direct contact with her birth parents remembered their abuse and felt they were still nasty. Abusive contact in general may retraumatise the child and should in the meantime be stopped, or be renegotiated to indirect contact, with the option of changing it again in the future in keeping with the child's wishes and feelings. The implication for practice here is that although contact may be beneficial, this is not always the case for every child, all of the time. Practitioners need to be aware that each case is unique; we should listen to the wishes and feelings of the child and the adoptive parents and the birth family in the matter of contact, in an ongoing way, and plan accordingly. The overriding implication for practice is that whether the children had contact or not, all but one in each group had secure attachments and well-formed identity.

Introduction to the Adoption and Children Act 2002

In essence there are many links between my findings, their implications for practice, and the ACA, which will be discussed throughout this chapter. I will consider the implications for overall policy and practice, and note where the new legislation has particular relevance to aspects of adoption work in which contact and information searching are central. I will further consider how the messages from my research do or do not fit in with the new legislation and policy. I will also consider how practice and its organisation might take on the messages from my research and from other research which mine supports, including Fratter (1996), Quinton et al. (1998), Thomas et al. (1999), Neil (2004) and Brodzinsky (2005). I shall address what I set out to do in this thesis and what actually arose. Briefly I will now describe the essence and aims of the Act.

The Adoption and Children Act 2002: essence and aims

The essence of the Act, like that of its predecessor the Children Act 1989, is that the welfare of the child is paramount. However, it differs in its effect which 'is to make the paramouncy principle of universal application in the majority of cases involving

children and, in so doing, is aimed at eliminating any tension which may have been created by the differing tests under the AA 1976 and the CA 1989. Under s1(2), the welfare of the child now reigns supreme as the consideration overriding all others. It is the clinching factor' (Bridge and Swindells 2003: 109).

The ACA aims to maximise the contribution that adoption can make to providing a lifelong, stable, safe, good-quality family life for children who cannot live with their birth families. An underlying political aim is to meet the government's target of getting more children placed for adoption and out of the care system. A Minister of State at the Department of Health, Jacqui Smith, said: 'The Government is committed to a 40 per cent increase in adoptions from care' DoH (2001b). She went on to say that the newly introduced Adoption Register and National Standards were salient in achieving this target. Indeed, the same document tells us that ' 3,067 children were adopted from care in England during 2000/2001.' This is 12% more than in the previous year, and over 40% more than in 1998/1999. So the Government is hopeful that more people will be encouraged to become adoptive parents.

The additional legislation provides much-needed pre- and post-adoption support for birth and adoptive families and the children. The need for increased preparation of all parties in adoption is identified in my study, in those of Quinton et al. (1998), Fratter (1996), Neil (2004: 63), and Smith and Logan (2004: 182), and in the third annual report of the Adoption and Permanence Taskforce (2004: 21), which says that 'adopter training programmes varied in duration and depth. Some prospective parents felt unprepared for the legal delays and complications that can arise and the distress this caused when they had taken responsibility for the children with whom they were now making attachments. Some felt 'abandoned' by the adoption service at this stage ... there were frequent comments that they would have welcomed the opportunity for further training to cope with children with complex needs.' The findings of my study concur with those researchers cited above.

When I began my research in October 2001 the legislation included little of what was encompassed in agency policies and procedures for pre- and post-adoption support for adoptive and birth parents or children. The new ACA changes this and is to be implemented fully on 30 December 2005. Post-adoption support is one of the new requirements which elaborate on the services required to be maintained by local authorities under section 1 of the 1976 Act, and it is the most relevant provision of the ACA to these implications for practice. Furthermore a national framework is

to be introduced for adoption support services, to improve consistency in their provision. Each local authority is expected to plan therapeutic services for adopted children in the context of the local Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in the NHS, and in cooperation with other agencies, making full use of joint funding where appropriate. Thus the government hopes to encourage more people to adopt by ensuring that the support they need is made available. In this way many more looked-after children would be found permanent homes, and the number of children drifting in care due to delays in planning would be reduced. The government plans to give financial support of £40m to implement these services, and says it is aware of the need to recruit more social workers and other staff (Department of Health 2001a).

To make the difficult task of locating appropriate support and services easier, for families who have had their needs assessed, there is now a requirement for each local authority (LA) to have an Adoption Support Services Adviser (ASSA) – a nominated officer who is a ‘single point of contact’ and who will signpost people in the adoption triangle to appropriate services, including health, education and voluntary agencies. A statement of these needs for support services must be provided by the LA, which must cover financial support, timescales, the individuals responsible for co-ordination, monitoring the delivery of services, the evaluation of success, review arrangements, and so on. These needs of and supports for adopters, adopted children and birth relatives, and how they are addressed by the ACA, are discussed below. Implications for practice brought out by the research and not addressed by the ACA are also discussed; these include angry teenage girls, despairing adoptive mothers, and possible connections between attachment and contact.

Interestingly and in keeping with a key finding from my research, that contact or the absence of contact makes little difference to the secure attachments and identity of children, there is no ‘presumption’ of contact in the new Act or ‘duty to promote’ contact to a looked-after child where parental consent has been given for the adoption placement. The government has said: ‘...a child placed for adoption is under a totally different situation. The end objective is separation from his or her family. The child is not in a normal family situation. He is under the supervision of the adoption agency, which will oversee any kind of contact. There is no presumption of contact with those persons’ (cited in Bridge and Swindells 2003: 232). However, courts will have a duty to consider contact arrangements, including the question of whether section 26 contact orders are required when making

placement orders (s27(4) of the Act). A section 26 contact order requires the person with whom the child lives or is to live, to allow the child to visit or stay with the person named in the order, or requires the person named in the order and the child otherwise to have contact with each other. The 'person with whom the child lives, or is to live', the prospective adopter(s) who have been identified or matched with a child or with whom the child has been placed, will be respondents to applications for section 26 contact orders, and so will have a voice in the court proceedings (Lane 2005: 13).

The most salient sections of the Act in the context of adoption and contact are discussed below, in chronological order of the adoption process, beginning with preparation of adopters and children, and going on to what Margaret Hodge, Minister for Children, Young people and Families says is 'Arguably one of the most significant aspects of the 2002 Act ... the inclusion of retrospective provisions to create a scheme providing for contact between birth relatives and adopted adults. This gives birth relatives – including the many thousands of young mothers who relinquished their babies for adoption in the 1950s, '60s and '70s – a new statutory right to request an intermediary service to trace an adopted adult and establish if contact would be welcome' (Department for Education and Skills 2004: 4). This seminal and equitable aspect of the Act is discussed below.

Implications for practice

My findings suggest that in their recruitment and preparation procedures and practice adoption agencies need to take into account the powerful influence of the agency's policy and of its social workers' attitudes to contact. This was also found to be the case by Tizard (1977), Fratter (1996) and Neil (2004). For practitioners the pendulum has swung from the 'clean break' view of adoption, which prevailed until the 1980s and would allow children to attach and become secure without the 'interference' of birth families, to the more open and inclusive approach to birth families encouraged by the Children Act 1989. The influence of practice wisdom was described by Fratter (1996: 4): 'Having been working as a field worker for many years in family placement ... I found it difficult to reconcile with my practice experience the widely held view that continuing contact was incompatible with achieving permanence.' Thus the feeling among practitioners began to grow that adopted children needed information about their backgrounds and that adopters could understand and accommodate contact more easily than previously assumed. Practitioners were also influenced by their work with adopted adults seeking

information about their birth families, who showed a clear need for information and reassurance about their birth families and the circumstances of their adoption. The work of Triseliotis (1974) and later Howe and Feast (2000) further illuminated the need for adopted children to have information about their background. Both research and practice wisdom influenced practitioners, and the courts also became influential in advocating contact.

So contact has now become the norm in adoption practice. But Quinton et al. (1998) refer to it as the current social experiment of contact, and say that we do not know what the future effects of the various kinds of contact may be for children into adulthood. So for practitioners and researchers there is an important gap in our knowledge about contact. Smith and Logan (2004) summarise the problem in their blurb: 'Few children nowadays are placed without any form of contact planned with birth relatives and professional practitioners are increasingly advocating the value of direct contact. Practice has outstripped evidence in this respect and not enough is known about how contact arrangements actually work out, particularly for older children adopted from state care.' Workers need further training on contact issues and need to address each child and each family as unique, with individual wishes and needs for contact. These needs, particularly those of the child, may change over time and can be addressed in an appropriate and ongoing way during the review of the placement. So further longitudinal research is necessary; research such as mine could follow the children through into adulthood and find out how they now feel about contact: is it still continuing, has it changed, what do they now think its benefits and detriments have been, and are they glad or sorry they had it?

It is interesting at this point to consider the study by Triseliotis, Feast and Kyle (2005) on adoption, search and reunion. They found that before reunion adopted adults and birth parents shared feelings of loss, rejection, grief, sadness, guilt, fear, and worry. Following reunion most of them gained a greater peace of mind, and their earlier detrimental feelings were mostly replaced with lesser or no feelings of guilt, rejection and worry; they felt more content and relaxed and had better self-esteem and emotional health. However, this study is not directly comparable with mine. The sample in Triseliotis et al. was much older than in mine and in the studies mentioned above, and they were all under 18 months when placed. Triseliotis et al. also found that a third of the adopted people reported that they had been given little or no background information, though only 14 per cent of their adopters agreed with this and all the others thought they had given their children background information. This probably reflects the less open era of adoption before

the 1980s. My own findings from this more open era reflect the children's and their adopters' perceptions that they had been given background information; only one family was uncomfortable about giving information to their children and had not tackled this task adequately or appropriately. In the end Triseliotis et al., like Quinton et al. (1998), advocate caution by telling us that the gains from contact and reunion do not diminish the profound feelings experienced by many of those involved, their perplexities and anxieties, and the changing nature of relationships which aroused new anxieties and stress. They go on to say '... the question could be asked whether forms of adoption that are open from the start could have prevented much of the anguish and pain' (Triseliotis et al. 2005: 379-80). From my findings it is clear that many adoptive mothers suffer anguish and pain around the time of contact and would benefit from support at this time, as would the angry teenage girls.

Adoptive parents also require preparation to enable them to cope with the often profound needs and challenges of children with complex backgrounds, who need reassurance and explanations about what is happening to them and why. My study and the others cited above showed that adopters have needs for pre- and post-placement support, to help them towards a better understanding of the attachment and trust-building needs of their insecurely attached children, and of the resulting behaviours and how to tackle them. An attachment assessment is commonly carried out with looked-after children, where their attachment and other needs are identified and can be written into the service plan. Foster carers too need support with preparing the children for adoption. So children and their adopters could be supported during the preplacement preparation by the child's workers and primary carer, who will need further training in attachment issues. This argument is supported by Alan Burnell from the Post-Adoption Centre (in Valios 2001): 'Local authorities have to stop thinking of adoption as a no-cost service, says Burnell. "You may not be paying the parents, but you are paying for the services that parents require to sustain the relationship."'

A further help to adopters in the understanding of their child's needs is the requirement of the National Adoption Standards (2001: C.2) that 'before a match is agreed, adoptive parents will be given full written information to help them understand the needs and background of the child and an opportunity to discuss this and the implications for them and their family.' Supporting this requirement are the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005; regulation 31(1)(a) says that when approaching an adoptive family about a child the adoption agency must send the

prospective adopters the child's permanence report. Reg. 31(1)(b) says that the adoption agency must arrange a meeting with the prospective adopters to discuss the proposed placement. Reg. 31(1)(c) requires the agency to ascertain the views of the prospective adopters about the proposed placement and contact arrangements, and must provide a counselling service to them, and any further information as may be required.

My findings showed that generally the adopters felt they had been given full and accurate information about the children. However, regarding contact, cognitively they understood its benefits for their children. But later on around the time of contact, for many adoptive mothers, their hearts took over and they were filled with despair. The latter finding implies that more work needs to be carried out with adopters to address these feelings pre- and post-adoption; it is not enough just to convince them that contact is beneficial for their children. These requirements have for many years been part of good practice. However, they may well vary between agencies and individual social workers and cases. The implementation of these requirements will give a more equitable service to adoptive parents and children nationwide. This duplication between the Regulations and the National Adoption Standards is a good example of the stipulation by each of them of other requirements too.

Since most contact is indirect, and direct contact is with siblings rather than birth mothers, my findings indicated a need for adolescents, particularly girls, in both groups to have a one-event meeting with their birth mother. At this key lifestage there is a fuller understanding of adoption. Identity issues that also occur in the general population of children affect adopted children particularly. So adopted young people may wish and need to see their birth mother for themselves, even though they have old photos. This applies mainly to girls; boys are more sanguine and usually feel they might like a meeting much later.

The young people often have questions for the birth mother about why she gave them up, whether she wonders about them, and whether they have any unknown siblings. The meeting can reassure them that she is alive and well and perhaps that she is interested in them. It also may reveal her frailties, confirming why she could not care for them, and at the same time it attests that they are now different from their birth mother, as they often worry that they have inherited her negative traits. As Margaret Bell (personal communication, March 2006) says, 'Does this mean that another possibility is that one-off contacts are easier to manage, less disruptive, and

at the same time serve the benefits of contact without the hassles?' Indeed as pointed out by Smith and Logan (2004: 173), contact in general with birth mothers was harder to manage than with other birth relatives. Neil (2004) supports this. So a one-event meeting may be a good compromise for everyone, particularly if it is spelt out in the initial planning meeting.

A concern for adopters is the implications of the ACA section 19 order. The objective here is to advance the court's decision about placement to a time before placement and usually before the identification of adopters, and part of this process would be the 'consideration of contact' by the court. This could present adopters with a *fait accompli*, and could lead them to make important decisions for themselves and their prospective child at a busy and emotional time in the adoption process. As my analysis showed, adopters, typified by Kate, would '...agree to anything [about contact] to get a baby.' My study found that the reality of contact for adoptive parents and their children became clearer much later when adopters were actually carrying it out; its longterm benefits overcame short-term difficulties and distress.

A further factor that concerns prospective adopters is the implications of a section 26 contact order under the ACA, outlined above. The prospective adopters as respondents to applications for section 26 orders have a voice in the court proceedings. The agency must review contact arrangements, including section 26 orders, in the light of the views of prospective adopters and any advice given by the adoption matching panel. A further implication of this order is that adoption panel members as well as social workers and others will need additional training on contact issues. The order can be varied or revoked during placement on application by the child, the adoption agency or any person named in the order. However, these orders will bind adopters during placement but not after the adoption order has been made.

Adoptive parents' anxieties could be raised by this order at a time when they need to put all their energy into building a relationship with their newly placed child. Moreover, birth parents will have a right to apply for a section 8 contact order (under the Children Act 1989) to be made with the adoption order, but it is unlikely they will be successful if a section 26 order was not granted. Section 8 orders can be applied for at any time after an adoption order is made, but only with the leave of the court, which is given very rarely under current law (Lane 2005.)

An important implication for practice is that letterbox contact was found in my study and in those of Macaskill (2002) and Neil (2004) not to be necessarily an easier option than face-to-face contact, as it too has emotional and practical issues for all parties. Not least of these is the lack of reciprocation by the birth family, which results in disappointment and distress for the child and adopters. Maureen Crank (2002: 110-111) of After Adoption writes of her agency's experiences: 'over time, in adoptions where contact arrangements are set up, the trend is for these to decrease or end. We see very many families, birth and adoptive, whose contact has stopped altogether. It could be that the child's needs have changed and were not reviewed. It is our view that all contact arrangements, even indirect letterbox exchanges, are too challenging for birth parents and adoptive parents to sustain without help. Birth parents who have contested an adoption find it especially difficult to maintain any contact unsupported. If letterbox contact has been set up, and even if a reminder has been sent, they often struggle to know what to write.' Moreover, supporting birth parents with contact is made difficult by their feelings of hostility towards the service that removed their child and by issues such as mental illhealth, drug or alcohol abuse, learning disabilities, a continuing chaotic lifestyle, or having no fixed address. The ACA 2002 to some degree has addressed these issues: birth parents will now have much-needed support with contact issues. However, this support may be unable to address the other chronic difficulties in their lives, which are longstanding and needed addressing at an earlier stage.

Hearing and acting upon children's wishes and feelings is of paramount importance to their best interests and to their self-esteem, and is a factor sometimes neglected with looked-after children. As discussed earlier in the study, I felt it was most important to interview children as well as their adoptive parents. The children's perceptions, thoughts, feelings and wishes about contact need to be heard, and if these wishes cannot be met because of risks to the children or because the birth parents have disappeared, then explanations and reassurances must be given. My analysis of my findings suggests that the children had anxieties and unanswered questions before and in the early stages of placement. One boy who was typical of many in his group explained how he had been scared and did not know what was going on when he first came to live with his new mum and dad. This is clearly a strong indication that children should receive adequate and appropriate preparation for adoption before and in the early stages of placement. In the context of contact and decisions about placement for adoption the ACA says that court and adoption agencies must have regard to ascertaining the children's wishes and feelings (s1(4)).

So my research, along with the studies of Thomas et al. (1999), Macaskill (2002) and Smith and Logan (2004), has brought out the importance of listening to children, and the ACA too has recognised the importance of this. The ACA's welfare checklist includes ascertaining: the child's wishes and feelings about placement for adoption; the child's particular needs; and the likely effect throughout the child's life of ceasing to be a member of the original family and becoming an adopted person. This checklist addresses contact needs, and also requires consideration of the child's religious, race and language origins. As discussed earlier, children placed transracially with adopters of a different heritage, as well as sharing many of the same experiences as other adopted people, have the additional issues of racial and ethnic identity to address, and they and their families need appropriate and adequate support in tackling these important extra tasks. The requirement to listen to children is linked closely with the children's contact needs, and is supported by my findings.

The practicalities and coordination required to achieve this objective could involve a great deal of work and time for courts and practitioners, who will have to listen to the children's wishes and needs, make assessment plans for the children's needs in the kind of adoptive family they require, and the type of contact, if any, that they require, and address other needs for special education, therapeutic services and so on. The practitioners themselves will need training and additional supervision to enable them to carry out these tasks. Judge Allweis (2002: 7) says: 'The negotiation of contact, and the substantial preparation for all, is a skilled and time consuming task.'

My findings suggested that in some cases where children have been traumatised by past experiences contact may not be appropriate. Macaskill (2002: 96), Thomas et al. (1999: 97), Farnfield (1998: 83) and Howe and Steele (2004: 220) support this. One example from my study was Holly, who had been seriously maltreated by her birth parents; she told me 'they were nasty to me and still are [at contact].' However, the needs of the child may change over time and the new review process can address these.

Having contact with siblings is a further, most important genealogical element to the wellbeing of adoptive children, who have lost many familiar people and other vital elements of their origins. Despite the possible complexities of contact, it seems that contact between siblings should be striven for where it is possible and appropriate. My study found that children appreciated being placed with siblings; they also

enjoyed contact with their siblings placed elsewhere, and were interested in siblings who might have been born to their birth parents after them. Lord and Borthwick (2001: 1, 4) tell us that brothers and sisters who share a childhood and grow up together have potentially the longest-lasting relationship and one of the closest relationships of their lives with each other. Arrangements for possible contact should be considered and discussed with children who are unable to live with their siblings. However, where abuse has occurred between the siblings, living together or direct contact may not be appropriate, particularly where a child is expressing concern about contact; then the child may feel safer placed separately or with supervised indirect contact. Sibling relationships must be considered under section 1(4)(f) of the ACA, and the Children Act 1989 supports the idea that it is generally in their best interests for children to be brought up together (Bridge and Swindells 2003: 123). The question of direct or indirect contact is not addressed specifically by the ACA, but could come under its general support for contact and be written into the assessment of the child's needs.

Further implications for practice: adoptive parents, children and birth parents

Throughout the study it can be seen that adoptive parents such as Oliver's, and others whose anxiously attached children were most challenging in the early years of the placements, needed extra support with issues such as insecure attachments and difficulties with contact. Now local authorities have a general duty to provide support services to adoptive families and to birth families in relation to contact, though not to stepparent adopters. These services include advice, counselling, support groups, therapy services, training for adopters to meet children's special needs, and respite care, as well as financial support. The LA has a legal duty to assess the child's need for adoption support before the matching panel (Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (England) Regulations 2003 reg 5(4)) and the adoptive family's needs on request at any time during the child's childhood (reg 8). There is legal discretion here; however, the LA's decisions must be 'reasonable', and are challengeable if they are not.

My research showed that many of the families with contact managed the contact well and made their own changes accordingly. However, it seemed that some of the children, birth parents and adoptive parents would have benefited from ongoing post-adoption mediation from their adoption agency, as the children's needs and wishes changed over time and the initial contact arrangements were no longer appropriate. This finding was confirmed by other studies cited in the research,

including Neil (2004) and Smith and Logan (2004), and the third annual report of the Adoption and Permanence Taskforce (2004). The Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005, to be implemented on 30 December 2005, address this need for mediation in relation to contact.

The research highlighted adoptive parents' anxieties about the birth mother as a threat. The emotional cost of contact to adoptive mothers was also found in Sykes (2000). One adoptive mother in my study found that her anxieties over the birth mother were relieved when she met her. She was able to see for herself the birth mother's vulnerabilities, and the myth of the 'monster' was removed. This was always the case in many such meetings I facilitated in my practice and is supported by Triseliotis et al. (1997).

Support for the birth families of adopted children is now enshrined in the legislation and will consist of an assessment and services in relation to contact between a placed child and her birth parents. Here too there is a duty to assess and discretion to provide support in relation to contact (Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (England) Regulations 2003). This research has found that few birth mothers successfully manage face-to-face contact or reciprocal indirect letterbox contact or a one-event meeting (usually held early in the placement). Beth Neil (2004) also found this to be the case, as did Macaskill (2002). Birth mothers are often anxious about meetings and feel inadequate, and are ill prepared and supported for it. The new support could enable birth mothers and other birth relatives to prepare for and work towards a meeting with adoptive parents, and gain understanding of and practice in the writing of appropriate reciprocal letters to the adopters and child. It could assist and empower the birth mothers in carrying out the difficult tasks of letter writing and meeting the adopters, gaining some sense of them and some information about their child's progress. Moreover, the support to carry out contact of some kind could reassure the birth mother of her child's welfare, and vice versa. Hence, her child's self-esteem could be heightened by her interest and a comfortable relationship developed with the adopters, but the birth mothers need to be informed, prepared, and helped to understand these concepts.

Support for birth relatives with contact issues is relevant also to children and adoptive parents, as is illustrated by the case of the adoptive parents of Laura, discussed earlier. Laura's parents questioned their decision to support Laura in her wish to terminate contact with her birth mother, although the birth mother's messages were inappropriate, disturbing and detrimental. Their main concern was

Laura's wellbeing and they realised that they might be closing a door that she might need or want to open in the future. In cases like this the new legislation could help the birth mother with writing more appropriate letters to her daughter and the adopters.

The ACA 2002 could now implicitly make provision for services to support an important need brought to light in my research, namely, that many adoptive mothers had profound feelings of desolation around the time of contact. This could be because they were reminded most strongly at the time of contact that there was another mother in the background and that she had given birth to their child, which the adoptive mother would dearly have wished to have done. These feelings could also be linked to the sadness and grief of infertility. However, it was not so much that infertility had not been tackled or resolved, more that this was a time of particular vulnerability when these feelings might come to the surface, as indeed they do with any loss, and have to be continually readdressed. Adoptive mothers could benefit from pre-placement preparation that would make them aware that these feelings could arise in the future at the time of contact; they could also benefit from post-adoption support to enable them to understand and come to terms with these profound feelings when they recur. A support group with professional input could help address this issue.

The research also revealed that adopters had difficulties making links between contact and attachment. This is not explicitly addressed in the ACA and is an important message which my research has for adoption practitioners. The nearer and far-reaching effects of contact are not yet understood, as pointed out by Quinton et al. (1998) and Smith and Logan (2004) quoted above. Contact or no-contact did not affect attachment. There are cases where it may impede attachment, as affirmed by Howe and Steele (2004), and I found in my analysis that a girl's developing attachments in her adoptive family were detrimentally affected by her birth mother's inappropriately emotional contact. Conversely, if contact could affect attachment positively, then practitioners need to have a better understanding of the how and why. In both cases practitioners need further training to prepare adopters appropriately and to inform their placement practice when considering contact.

An important concern of some adopters in the study was the current, incomplete and possibly misunderstood reports in the media that birth mothers could now make contact with their adopted child. Indeed, regulations made under the ACA (s98) have given birth relatives for the first time the right, through an intermediary, to seek

information about a related adult, adopted as a baby or child (Draft Access to Information (Pre-Commencement Adoptions) Regulations 2004). 'The focus of this law is on people who were legally adopted by strangers before 1975 – after which adoptions became more open – of whom there are probably around half a million still alive' (Hilpern 2005). However, these new provisions are based on adopted people giving informed consent to their details being passed on, and therefore take careful account of a person's right to privacy. With the understanding that it is only through an intermediary that an adopted adult can be contacted, this seems a reasonable and fair right for birth relatives to have been given, and at the same time it protects the privacy of the adopted person.

The background of many children in the study was one of frightened and frightening birth parents, which did not easily allow the development of attachment, and the longer they had experienced the background of neglect and abuse, the more affected they often were (Howe et al. 1999: 123). So, as my analysis suggests, it might also take an equal amount of time to 'repair' the damage they have suffered and to promote security and trust in a new family. The children in my study and their adoptive parents had survived and flourished, but for many it had taken time. The ACA legislates for support both before placement and after adoption; clearly there is a great need for this earlier supportive intervention from the childcare social worker, adoption worker, other professionals such as a psychologist, and the foster carer, so as to give the adopters information about the child's background and attachment issues, and to pass on strategies to assist in allaying the child's fears and in developing attachment in her or his new family. This type of support could come in various forms to suit the diversity and various needs of adopters, and could include: easily accessible community children's centres which any parent could approach for support with difficulties (but staff would need training in adoption issues); distance learning packages; training workshops for identified needs; and homeworkers where appropriate.

An important implication for practice raised in my findings is that of the promotion of the identity of the adoptive family as a whole. Whilst information-giving is the most salient feature in the identity formation of the adopted child, it is easy to forget that the sense of identity of the adoptive family also needs upholding and maintaining. One factor in the cases of Holly and Laura discussed earlier was that contact was too frequent. This is not necessary for these children's identity formation, and may undermine the formation of the identity of the adoptive family. Smith and Logan (2004: 183) agree with this, adding that too frequent contact, more than four to six

times annually, may erode the adoptive family's sense of identity. Thorough discussion with the adoptive and birth relatives is needed to clarify contact plans and to help the birth relatives towards realistic expectations of contact and its frequency. An acceptable timing of such discussions is crucial, particularly when considering the formation of the adoptive family's identity. Adoptive families often feel they need space and time from social work interventions after the making of an adoption order (Bell, Crawshaw and Wilson 2001). So discussion about contact could be carried out before placement, and in the months following placement, particularly at a meeting between the birth and adoptive families, with the support and preparation of their social worker, who will need further training in these issues, as will the birth and adoptive parents.

Conclusion

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 is a much-needed piece of legislation in the context of contact, and most pertinent to the implications for practice revealed by my research and those of other studies cited above. This major legislative reform makes support a standard part of all adoption plans, and is intended to provide a more transparent and equitable basis for planning and decision-making and to speed the process up (BAAF News, July 2004). The legislation provides support which may enable adoptive and birth parents towards a better understanding of their own, their children's and each others' needs in the complex issues of direct and indirect contact discussed above. This would involve more preparation and training of birth and adoptive parents about separation and loss, attachment and trust building, and how contact may or may not affect attachment. Workers too would need further training and supervision in these issues.

This research and my own experience of practice, however, led me to have some concerns about the implementation of the support services for those affected by adoption. So in July 2005 I contacted five adoption agencies in the north of England to enquire how the implementation was proceeding. None of the agencies had actually set up services, but were in the process of identifying service providers. Resource restrictions seemed to be one of the restraining factors. Felicity Collier in BAAF News (July 2005) voiced the same concerns: ' I fear there is much to be done to ensure responsibility is maintained at the highest level in local authority decision-making, and that cooperation is achieved with health and education. Otherwise far too many adopted children and their families will not receive the support which they need to maximise the chance of a good outcome. We hope very much that the new

structures for children's services will help deliver the joined-up services required, but it is early days and experiences to date are not encouraging.' There needs to be better communication and cooperation between the main health services, social services and voluntary services to achieve this requirement. The ACA aspires to high ideals, as it should. The implementation of services by the end of 2005 seems unrealistic, but nevertheless the overriding principle that children's interests must be paramount is an ideal to be aimed for.

Whilst carrying out my research I was also aware of the politics involved. Denzin (2005: x) advises us that '... the politics and the ethics of research must also be considered, for these concerns permeate every phase of the research process.' This chapter has discussed the government's interest in more children being placed in adoptive families. Most of these children have contact, which is often complex and at times may have a detrimental impact on the family. The study has shown, through the good outcomes for all of the children, even Oliver, that it is beneficial for them to have a permanent, safe and loving family of their own. And this shows government targets in a good light and has been less costly than keeping children in the care system. But these children have complex backgrounds, and as well as needing much patience, understanding and love from their adopters, they often need a great deal of preparation, and current or later therapeutic help, to enable them to develop as trusting, secure children who can grow up to become happy, secure, responsible adults. The support package for birth and adoptive parents and children is indeed very necessary, as was found in my research and that of Fratter (1996) and Neil (2004).

It is clear from this study and the research cited above that the whole business of contact in adoption is fraught with complexities; there is as yet no actual, definite, clear set of rules by which to get contact 'right'. However, it is to be hoped that the projected optimism of the Act is fulfilled by its requirements for more pre- and post-adoption support for all parties to contact, so as to promote the best possible outcome for the child and others concerned in this important and complex lifelong phenomenon.

It is also very clear from research cited throughout this thesis and from my own study that there is a need for further research to shed light on the appropriate kind of contact for each child and family, which would also take into account the ongoing and changing needs which will occur through the different lifestages of the children. Finally, further longitudinal research on a bigger scale than mine, and if possible not

self-selected, is needed, to examine more widely and deeply the meaning of contact to those involved.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Letter to the adoption team leader

Appendix 2: Letter to 156 adoptive families

Appendix 3: Appeal for families with no contact

Appendix 4: Sample letter to families with contact with whom I had worked

Appendix 5: Letter after the summer party

Appendix 6: Postal questionnaire: You and Your Children

Appendix 7: Semi-structured interview schedule

Appendix 8: Introductory letter to the children

Appendix 9: Children's and young people's consent form

Appendix 10: Identity game for children: Who Do You ...?

Appendix 11: Crittenden's classifications of attachment

Appendix 12: Children's defensive strategies

Appendix 1: Letter to the adoption team

Team Leader
The Adoption Team

29 May 2003

Dear Daphne

You may remember, from our conversation at the leaving-do, that I'm carrying out some research at York University into adopted children's post-adoption contact with their birth parents. Well, I am looking for some help from you.

For the research I need a sample of thirty adoptive parents and their children – fifteen children who have contact with their birth families and the same number who do not. I want to examine how the contact or lack of it affects the children's sense of belonging and their attachment to their adoptive parents and adoptive siblings, and then to compare those who have and those who do not have contact. I hope to look at children and young people between six and fourteen.

What I hope to do, with the agreement of yourself and the Director (whom I understand I should approach directly), is to send a short letter and a leaflet to the adoptive parents. When you are happy with the wording, these could be sent with the summer party invitations. The letter would invite them to contact me if they are interested in taking part in the research and would like further details. Maybe it would be a good idea for me to come to the summer party, to let them have a look at me; many will know me from my work with them in the past, and others will know me from the preparation and support groups.

I would welcome ideas and questions about my proposed research from yourself and the team, and would be keen to attend a team meeting, if you think this would help.

I am very enthusiastic and excited about this research, but I do need your help to carry it out. After working in the team for eleven years I know that it is a really excellent one, and I would like very much to come and be a small part of you again. I believe that the findings of this research will inform practice and that this study will be most worthwhile.

I hope you have had a good holiday and look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Jacqui Dally

Appendix 2: Letter to 156 adoptive families

(This letter was originally on one page.)

Post-adoption contact and what you think about it

Please would you help with my research?

Dear adoptive parents,

I worked for the Hull Adoption Team for eleven years, and am now doing research at the University of York. As you know, it is really important that we hear from the people that matter about how it has been for them – and what they think about post-adoption contact, so I am very much hoping that you and your family would like to take part in this project.

I will be interviewing only families, not any social workers. I want to reassure you that I will be most careful to keep the research confidential by changing everyone's names and details.

The research is about post-adoption contact of adopted children and young people with their birth families – how it affects all of you in becoming a family, getting on together, fitting in, what the children think about their past, what you all feel about belonging together. I would like to work with one group of adopters and their children who have some form of contact (even just once), particularly face-to-face contact, and another group of families who have no contact.

I do need help to carry out the research, as without you it can't be done. It would involve one interview with the adoptive parents lasting 1½ to 2 hours, and (with your permission) one interview with your child/ren, individually or together, lasting 1 to 1½ hours, using writing, drawings and questions. The kind of questions would be: What do you like about living with your family? How do you all get on? Is there anything you don't know and would like to know about your past? The questions would be similar for you and your children – and, of course, I will go through it all in greater detail with you before you agree to take part.

I need your informed consent for this research. I will be writing it up as a doctoral thesis, and will be careful to keep the findings anonymous. This research will help

practitioners to understand more about contact, so that it works better for children and their families. I am planning to begin interviewing near the end of October.

If you and your child or children might like to take part and would be willing for me to contact you directly, to give you more information and answer your questions, please complete the enclosed slip and return it to me in the SAE.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Jacqui Dally

Cut here

.....

Your name(s)

.....

Your address

.....

.....

Postcode.....

Telephone.....

Email.....

I/We give consent for Jacqui Dally to contact me/us directly.

Your signature(s)

.....

Return to: Jacqui Dally, SPSW Dept, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10

5DD jmd124@york.ac.uk

Appendix 3: Appeal for families with no contact

Do you know of any families without contact?

I desperately need more families with no post-adoption contact with the birth relatives

These families are likely to be from the early days of the Adoption Team –
1989 to the early 1990s

With your help I have now interviewed eleven families – nine adoptive parents who have some form of contact and two families who have no contact. However, one of the no-contact families has a child who was too young to interview. In all, I have interviewed twenty-two children from these families; eight of these were younger siblings who were keen to take part but too young properly to understand the questions, but I felt it important to include them nevertheless. They all loved getting their individual letters containing information about the research and the researcher.

So as you can see, I need at least another eight families who have no contact. It doesn't sound many – but initially we sent out 156 letters to adoptive parents and followed up nonrespondents and still our number of respondents was only twenty-one. I am quite sure this is because I want to interview the children, and of course it is most understandable that many adopters are unsure of this.

If you have any appropriate families I'd much appreciate it if you would write their names at the end of this and return it to me.

To bring you up to date with my progress, my overall impressions, so far, are these:

- Overall, adoptive parents and their children are happy and thoroughly enjoying life.
- The majority of the children are enjoying school and doing well.
- The majority of children are well attached and have a good sense of identity.
- Many adoptive mothers are positive and appreciative of the benefits of contact for themselves and their children. However, when it comes around, whether in its direct or indirect form, they feel profoundly affected by the reminder and fresh realisation that the child was not born to them.
- Children placed immense importance on their sibling(s) being in placement with them.

These are just a few of my initial impressions. I shall give you another update when I complete my interviewing, transcribing and analysis, and also give you an opportunity, perhaps at a team meeting, to ask questions and make comments.

With many thanks for your time, involvement and help.

Jacqui Dally

Cut here

.....

Families with no contact

Appendix 4: Sample letter to families with contact with whom I had worked

August 2004

Dear

It was really good to talk with you this morning, catch up, and hear all your news.

As discussed on the telephone, on this occasion I will not need to see you and the children to take part in my current research. As I explained, my supervisor advised me that having worked so closely with you and the children I would be considered by the examiners to be biased. However I am pleased you agreed to be contacted in the future should I carry out further research.

With all good wishes to you and the family.

Yours sincerely

Jacqui

Appendix 5: Letter after the summer party

CONTACT RESEARCH

30 July 2003

Dear

It was good to see you at the adoption party last Sunday. We were so lucky to have such a beautiful day.

I am very pleased that you are interested in taking part in my research into post-adoption contact. It should help us find out more about contact and make it work better for families and children.

I will be in touch later in the summer with more information for you and an easy questionnaire to get us started. I plan to carry out the interviews in the autumn. I look forward to seeing you then.

In the meantime, if you have any pressing questions or concerns, please do contact me at the University. I check my emails every day, but am not always available on the phone.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Jacqui Dally

Email: jmd124@york.ac.uk

Phone: 01904 321263

Appendix 6: Postal questionnaire

(This questionnaire was originally on one page.)

You and your children

This will help me to begin to get to know you and your children better

Please complete one form for each adopted child

Your name(s) **d.o.b.** **Marital status**

Your child's name **d.o.b.** **Gender**

Who else is in your family living with you?

Your child's age at placement **Date of placement with you**

Date of coming into foster care

Have you got a form E and would it be available for me to read?

Contact Please circle your answers, and add whatever you wish

Do you or your child have any contact now with the birth family? Yes No

If yes, who with in the birth family? Please be specific

If yes, what kind of contact is it?

Face-to-face contact How frequent?

**Indirect contact (eg letterbox system, newsletter, phone calls, cards, photos, videos,
other means)** How frequent?

Thank you very much for your answers. When we meet, the sort of questions I might ask you are: reasons for coming into care; how has she or he settled/attached with you; what do you think of contact; what does your child think of it; and so on.

Please sign your name(s) below to show your understanding of and commitment to the research.

Signature(s)

.....

With many thanks

Jacqui Dally

Appendix 7: Semi-structured interview schedule

Semi-structured interview schedule

Preliminary matters to address with adopters

Where I have had previous contact with the family I will explain to them that in my role as a researcher I need them to be honest with me about their experiences of preparation, support and so on, including my own role in this.

Confidentiality will be maintained by changing names and other identifying information. However, as already outlined in the questionnaire letter, my thesis will be available in the library on request. If a child or young person makes a disclosure of harm in the interview, I cannot keep this confidential; I must report it to the SSD.

'After the interviews old or new issues may be raised for you or your children. If this does happen, support will be available from your adoption agency post-adoption support worker. The agency is aware that this need may arise. Other support is available from After Adoption Yorkshire.' [Give leaflet.]

'Do you have any misgivings at all before we start the questions?'

Remind them of the recording machine and that I will need to change the tape.

TURN ON MICROPHONE AND RECORDER

Questions for the semi-structured interview with the adoptive parents

Attachment questions for parents

- 1 How was she when she first came to you?
- 2 How is she settled now?
- 3 How are you all getting on?
- 4 How does she get on with the other children in the family?
- 5 How well do you feel you knew her when she first came? Was she the child described to you verbally and on the paperwork given?
- 6 How well do you feel you know her now?

- 7 What do you think she likes about living with you?
- 8 What is not so easy for her about living with you?
- 9 Who does she turn to at times of upset, illness, anxiety and so on?
- 10 Is she confident enough yet to explore or attempt new activities, tasks or interests on her own?
- 11 With whom does she share the interests or tasks? [Adolescent observation 6]
- 12 How easy is it to give her praise and encouragement?
- 13 Does she talk openly and confidently with you?
- 14 Does she talk openly and confidently with grandparents, friends, and so on?
- 15 Does she show affection? How?
- 16 How do you show affection to her, and how does she react to affection from you and other family members? [Adolescent observation 9]
- 17 Has this changed since she has been with you?
- 18 Is she calm and relaxed, or rigid and overactive?
- 19 Does she express emotions appropriately, when she is sad, happy, angry, confused, and so on?
- 20 How much does she make eye contact and smile?
- 21 How does she react to her extended family?
- 22 How does she react to her peers?
- 23 How do you handle problems between the siblings?
- 24 Does she seem to be developing a conscience and to know right from wrong?
- 25 Do you give her tasks and responsibilities to carry out? [Adolescent observation 2]
- 26 How do you discipline her? [Adolescent observation 1] Withdrawal of privileges, grounding, time out etc.?
- 27 Do you set boundaries? [Adolescent observation 1]
- 28 Does she test limits?
- 29 Do you trust her? [Adolescent observation 3]
- 30 What if she gets into trouble? Pregnancy, drugs, crime? [Adolescent observation 8]
- 31 Do you think she'll turn out OK? [Adolescent observation 10]
- 32 How does she exhibit confidence in her own abilities, or does she frequently say 'I don't know'?
- 33 Who was she attached to before she came to you? Does this attachment continue?
- 34 Who is she attached to now?

Identity questions for parents

- 35 How would you describe her personality? What kind of character is she?
- 36 What do you think she would say about her own personality? How does she see herself?
- 37 Who does she look like? Is she happy with the way she looks?
- 38 How does she like it around here (this neighbourhood and community)?
- 39 How does she get on with the neighbours and people in the community?
- 40 How do they get on with her?
- 41 Does she have any interests within the community? And who are these shared with?
- 42 How is she getting on at school? [Adolescent observation 5]
- 43 How does she get on with school friends? And what do you think of her friends?
[Adolescent observation 4]
- 44 What does she know and understand about her background?
- 45 Why did she need adopting, why was she unable to live with her birth family?
- 46 Why did you want to adopt? Why did you want to adopt *her*?
- 47 What is your wider experience of adoption, if any – of friends and family adopted or adopters?
- 48 Do you think her birth mother loved her? Does she still love her?
- 49 Does your child love her birth mother?
- 50 Does your child know, think or wonder about this?
- 51 Do you think her birth father, siblings or other birth relatives loved her?
- 52 Does she love them?
- 53 Does your child know, think or wonder about this?
- 54 What do you think she would still need or like to know, and why?
- 55 Has she been told anything that has been particularly upsetting?
- 56 Do you think anything should have been left out until later, or forever?

Contact questions for parents

- 57 What does contact mean to you? [Or for no-contact families: What would contact mean to you if you had it?]
- 58 What does contact mean to your child? Do you think it has made any difference to what she knows about herself, identity or assisted in her attachment?
- 59 Who suggested contact, and when, and what was your initial response?
- 60 Where do you meet, who do you meet, who organises and supervises and finances the contact, who arranges transport? [NA to no-contact families]

- 61 Has this pattern changed? If so, why and how has it changed? [NA]
- 62 What do you like or find helpful about contact? [Or for no-contact families: What might you like or find helpful about contact if you had it?]
- 63 What do you not like or find unhelpful or difficult about contact? What are you not so keen on about contact? [Or: What would ...?]
- 64 What does she like about contact? [Or: What would ...?]
- 65 What does she not like or find unhelpful or difficult about contact? What is she not so keen on about contact? [Or: What would ...?]
- 66 Why do you think you do it? Has it brought you closer? Has it assisted attachment or identity? [Or: Why would ...? Would it ...?]
- 67 Would you like to change anything about contact?
- 68 Was the preparation for contact helpful?
- 69 Who helped or are helping with it? Child care social worker, family social worker, experienced adopter, others? [NA]
- 70 What was helpful in the negotiation, planning and support of contact? [NA]
- 71 What was unhelpful in the negotiation, planning and support of contact? [NA]
- 72 That was my last question. I've asked you a lot of questions; would you like to ask me anything?
- 73 Are there any other issues you would like my research to examine or explore?

Observations for assessing parent's attachment to child

Does the parent

- show interest in the child's school performance?
- accept and understand the expression of negative feelings?
- respond to the child's overtures?
- support the child in developing healthy peer relationships?
- handle problems between siblings equitably?
- initiate affectionate overtures?
- use appropriate discipline?
- give age-appropriate responsibilities to the child?

Questions for the semi-structured interview with the child

Attachment questions for the child

74 How are getting on in your family?

75 And what about the other children, how are you getting on with them?

76 How are you getting on with sharing things in your family?

77 What was it like when you first came to join your family, your mum and dad?

78 What do you like about living with your mum and dad?

79 What are you not so keen on about living with your mum and dad?

80 Who do you go to when you're upset, anxious, ill?

81 How do you show your mum and dad you're upset?

82 Do you try out new things to do, new activities, tasks, interests and responsibilities?

83 What are these? And who are they shared with?

84 How do you feel about trying out new things?

85 How do your parents show they care about you?

86 How do you show them that you care about them?

87 Do your mum and dad show they're pleased with you? Do they praise and encourage you?

88 Do your mum and dad show they're not pleased with you?

89 Do your mum and dad discipline and set boundaries for you?

90 If you make a mistake, how do you feel? Accept that we all make mistakes? or feel frightened, angry, sad, or confused? [Use feelings cards here]

Observations for assessing attachment in children

Does the child

- smile and make eye contact easily?
- seem relaxed and not overactive or rigid?
- seem comfortable speaking to adults?
- behave in a way that reflects a liking for herself?
- appear proud of accomplishments?
- always test limits?
- seem able to express emotions?
- appear to be developing a conscience?
- react to parents being physically close?

Identity questions for the child

91 Some children are happy with the way they look, but other children are not so happy. How do you feel?

92 What do your mum and dad think you're like? How would they describe your personality?

93 What's it like living round here, in this neighbourhood?

94 What do you think of the neighbours and other people?

95 Do you share any interests with people in the neighbourhood?

96 What do *they* say about you?

97 Who are your friends? Do you have friends at school?

98 How are you getting on at school?

99 What do you like about being a boy / girl?

100 What are you not so keen on about being a boy / girl?

Contact questions for the child

101 Who do you have contact with? [NA]

102 Are you happy with contact the way it is now? [NA]

103 Is there anyone else you would like to have contact with? [Is there anyone from your past, birth family, foster family, friends ...?] [Four field map can be used here]

104 What do you like about contact? [Or: What do you think you might have liked if you'd had contact?]

105 What has it helped you to learn about yourself? Do you think contact has made any difference to what you know about yourself, your identity, about who you are? [Or: What might ...?]

106 What are you not so keen on about contact? [Or: What might ...?] [Feelings cards can be used here.]

107 What do you wonder, think and feel about your birth mum?

108 What do you wonder, think and feel about your birth dad, siblings, foster carers, and anyone else from your past?

109 What do you know about your past? Why were you unable to live with your birth mum?

110 What would you still like to know?

111 Has anything stopped you asking?

112 What do your adoptive parents think about contact? [Or: What would ...?]

113 Who do you think you're like? Look like, sound like, act like?

114 Do you think contact has helped your closeness or attachment to your mum and dad? [Or: Do you think contact would have ...?]

Questions for adolescents

114 What kind of things do you do at home?

115 What outside interests do you have?

116 Have you been involved with the police? If so, how seriously?

117 What are the strong points about your personality?

118 What are the weak points about your personality?

119 What do you think about your parents' values, what they believe in? Do you accept their values?

120 What do you think about your parents' limits?

121 Do you feel your adoptive parents have helped you tell right from wrong?

122 That was my last question. I've asked you a lot of questions; would you like to ask me anything?

123 Are there any questions you would like my research to address?

Observations for assessing attachment of adolescents

Do the parents

- set appropriate limits?
- encourage appropriate autonomy?
- trust their adolescent?
- show interest in and acceptance of her friends?
- show interest in their adolescent's school performance?
- show interest in her outside activities?
- have reasonable expectations about chores and responsibilities the adolescent takes on?
- stand by her if she gets into trouble?
- show affection?
- think she will 'turn out' OK?

Appendix 8: Introductory letter to the children

(The letter was originally on one page and included a coloured photo of the researcher.)

I am writing to introduce myself to you before I meet you and your Mum and Dad.

My name is Jacqui Dally and I used to work for the XXX adoption team. I now work at York University and I am writing a book about adoptive family life, and what adopted children and their parents think about contact. To help me write the book I need to speak to quite a few adopted children and young people.

So I need your help. I'd like to talk with you about adoption. What and who helped you the most? What made adoption and contact easy or difficult for you? Would you like to change anything? I very much want to hear your answers to these and other questions.

I hope you will be able to help me. By talking to you I will be able to help other children who are going to be adopted in the future. By talking to me you can help them too.

Here are some questions you may have, and my answers

How long do you want to talk with me for? – About an hour, or longer if you've got a lot to tell me.

Will you put my name in your book? – No, I will change your name. No-one will know who you are.

Will you tell anyone what I say? – No, but some things will be in the book.

Will you write down what I say? – I'd like to tape what you say, if that's OK.

Can I change my mind about taking part? – Of course. You can change it at any time.

Do I have to answer every question? – No.

Can I talk to you first? – Yes. Phone me on 01484 688203, or email me at jmd124@york.ac.uk.

Appendix 9: Children's and young people's consent form

**University of York, SPSW Dept, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD
jmd124@york.ac.uk**

Children's and young peoples' consent form

I would like to take part in Jacqui Dally's adoption research.

I do not have to answer every question.

I can pause or stop the interview at any time.

Signed

My name printed

Date

Appendix 10: Identity game for children: Who Do You ...?

Who do you ... ?

look like

act like

talk like

behave like

walk like

laugh like

think like

Where do you get ... ?

your talents

music

sport

football

cooking

love of animals

drawing and painting

gardening

school work

reading

writing

love of food

allergies

medical problems

Appendix 11: Crittenden's classifications of attachment

Secure children before starting school are competent with cognitive and affective information and can amalgamate both into a meaningful, correspondingly predictable view of the world. They have learned there is more satisfaction to be gained from open and direct communication than from being defended or coercive. So communicating through speech becomes important to the child.

Ambivalent (C) children have carers whose nurturing comes and goes and who are unpredictable in their responses. These children come to distrust cognitive information and by nearly three their behaviour may be organised around alternating angry outbursts and charming or coy behaviour to keep their carer's attention – what Crittenden calls the coercive strategy.

Defended children (A) have learned to trust what they know happens, so they do not make emotional demands of carers who are rejecting or interfering. They can manage closeness physically but keep a psychological distance. Children who have withdrawn carers may put on a front of superficial cheerfulness to draw their carers closer to them. '[Children] whose environments are very complex and variable may combine the defended and coercive strategies into an A/C pattern' (Crittenden 1995: 379), and this is her fourth classification.

Insecure avoidant children (A) end their attachment behaviour too early, and in Crittenden's terms may in extreme conditions falsify affect. For example, children caring for a depressed parent always put on a false front of cheerfulness and give the impression that everything is alright. It is as if by doing so they reassure the parent that things are alright (A3). In dangerous circumstances children may exhibit compulsive compliance (A4). One of the basic ploys of these children is to 'please the grown-ups'. But when adults are not looking these defended children may bully others. They do not develop close relationships with peers. They have a façade of being pleasant and friendly, but beneath it are angry and profoundly sad.

Individual carers are seen by defended children as completely good or bad, and these children are most likely, having painted a parent totally bad, sometimes to request being received into care, although they may change their mind later. It may be that they have a mainly absent parent whom they idealise. Foster carers may then be idealised, but when they cannot reach the high expectations of the children

they are rejected. The mildly defended children (A1-2) are often easier for substitute carers to look after, as the children may try hard with sport and academic pursuits. However, carers may have difficulty achieving a close relationship with them (Farnfield 1998: 81).

Ambivalent or coercive children tend to extend attachment behaviour. The Crittenden model shows that the more extreme responses (C5-6) include faking and warping of logic for ulterior ends. Such children use devious and cunning arguments (C5) to trick or persuade carers into going along with their plans. Seductive behaviour is used by other children in this group (C6). Crittenden considers there is an expectation that coercive children will exhibit attention-seeking behaviour, and also disorders of thought that divert attention away from themselves. She also points out that most coercive children referred to psychological services are boys. However, this may overlook girls who are pretending to be extremely helpless or who are cultivating victimisation (C4-6) (Crittenden 1995: 394).

Crittenden's attachment patterns indicate that the general population is dispersed across the milder As (1-2) through the Bs to the milder Cs (1-2). The secure B patterns include few children in care, but some do come to the edges of A 1-2 and C 1-2. There is no child who perfectly fits the model, and many children will exhibit features of various categories, but the crucial organisational characteristics of the four patterns will usually emerge. So the whole child needs to be looked at, taking into consideration patterns of behaviour and the mental processes that may be involved.

Appendix 12: Children's defensive strategies

- *Securely* attached children make direct, positive approaches to their carers, knowing that their distress and upset will be recognised and responded to *unconditionally* with comfort and understanding. A sense of trust in others and a recognition of the value of cooperative behaviour soon develop. (B)
- Children with rejecting, neglectful, interfering or controlling carers become quiet and contained to achieve closeness with the carer, using *avoidant* attachment patterns to avoid annoying their carer. The children have had to adopt these secondary attachment strategies and minimise usual attachment behaviour to enable them to adapt to their circumstances and not be rejected. The authors define this containment of emotions and actions when the child is distressed as 'a *flight* from a display of attachment needs' (p28). (A)
- The child who displays an *ambivalent* attachment style tends to receive insensitive, unreliable and inconsistently responsive care and has to maximise her or his attachment behaviour, and demands attention and protection by shouting, clinging, fretting and threatening. The lack of interest and responsiveness results in the child feeling unworthy and remaining dependent on the carer, who has not given her the security needed to explore and to gain confidence, independence and knowledge. (C)
- Children who *cannot organise* their behaviour or create a defensive strategy to gain closeness and security have high and chaotic levels of distress and arousal. Generally the attachment figure was the cause of the distress in the first place, because of depression, or drug or alcohol abuse, or failure to protect. So these children find it problematic to have a good relationship that helps them develop and behave effectively. The children may have tried the other strategies – secure, ambivalent and avoidant – without achieving the desired closeness and security. This results in their attachment behaviour becoming increasingly *incoherent* and *disorganised*, a confused tangle of avoidance, angry approach responses, unsettled behaviour and apathy. With no organised attachment strategy, children may *freeze*, either physically or psychologically. (D)

Bibliography

Adoption and Permanence Taskforce (2004) *Third Annual Report*, London: Department for Education and Skills.

Advisory Board on Family Law. Children Act Sub-Committee (2002) *Making Contact Work: a Report to the Lord Chancellor on the Facilitation of Arrangements for Contact Between Children and their Non-Residential Parents and the Enforcement of Court Orders for Contact*, London: Lord Chancellor's Department.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M., Athers, E. and Wall, S. (1978) *Patterns of Attachment: a Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*, Hillsdale (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum.

Allweis, M. (2002) Contact in permanent placements: a judicial perspective. Paper given at a BAAF conference in December 2002.

Argent, H. (2002) *Staying Connected: Managing Contact Arrangements in Adoption*, London: BAAF.

Barker, S., Smith, S. and Morris, S. (1996) *Planning for Permanence*, London: BAAF. (Practice notes; 13)

Barth, R. and Berry, M. (1988) *Adoption and Disruption: Rates, Risks and Responses*, New York: Aldine DeGruyter.

Beckett, C., Groothues, C. and O'Connor, T. (1998) Adoption from Romania: the role of siblings in adjustment, *Adoption and fostering* 22, 2: 25-34.

Bell, M., Crawshaw, M. and Wilson, K. (2001) *The Views of Approved Adopters on their Preparation and Assessment for Adoption*. York: University of York.

Bell, M., Wilson, K. and Crawshaw, M. (2002) *Adoption Reform: Managing Diversity and Delay*, London: BAAF.

Berry, M. (1991) The effects of open adoption on biological and adoptive parents and the children: the arguments and the evidence, *Child Welfare* 70: 637-649.

Bourton, A. and O'Grady, S. (1999) *Key Messages from Adoption and Contact Training Day*, Hull: Humberside GALRO Panel. Summary of the conference *Arrangements for Contact in Care Plans and Adoption* (Hull: 1998).

Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment and Loss*. Vol. 1: *Attachment*, London: Hogarth Press.

Bowlby, J. (1979) *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*, London: Tavistock.

Brebner, C. M., Sharp, J. D. and Stone F. (1985) *The Role of Infertility in Adoption*, London: BAAF.

Bridge, C. and Swindells, H. (2003) *Adoption: the Modern Law*, Bristol: Family Law.

British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (2003) *Adoption Planning for Babies: BAAF Position Statement*, London: BAAF.

Brodzinsky, D. (1984) New perspectives on adoption revelation, *Adoption & Fostering*, 8, 2, 27-32.

Brodzinsky, D. (2005) Reconceptualizing openness in adoption: implications for research and practice. In: Brodzinsky, D.M. and Palacios, J. (eds) *Psychological Issues in Adoption: Research and Practice*, Westport, CT: Praeger.

Brodzinsky, D. M., Singer, L. M., and Braff, A. M. (1984) Children's understanding of adoption, *Child Development* 55: 869-878.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992) Ecological systems theory. In: Vasta, R. *Six Theories of Child Development*, Philadelphia: Kingsley.

Browne, D. and Moloney A. (2002) Contact irregular: a qualitative analysis of the impact of visiting patterns of natural parents on foster placements, *Child and Family Social Work* 7, 1: 35-45.

Bryman, A. (2001) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Bull, R. and Shaw, I. (1992) Constructing causal accounts in social work, *Sociology*, 26, 4: 635-649.
- Cassidy, J. and Shaver, P. R. (1999) *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, New York: Guilford Press.
- Chase, S. E. (2005) Narrative inquiry: multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In: Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (2005) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., London: Sage.
- Clapton, G. (2003) *Birth Fathers and their Adoption Experience*, London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Clarke, A. and Clarke, A. (2001) Early adversity and adoption solutions, *Adoption & Fostering* 25, 1: 24-32.
- Community Care (2002) The secret is out, *Community Care* 22 August 2002.
- Corden, A. and Sainsbury, R. (2005) *Research Participants' Views on Use of Verbatim Quotations*, York: University of York, Social Policy Research Unit.
- Courtney, A. (2000) Loss and grief in adoption: the impact of contact, *Adoption & Fostering* 23, 4: 33-43.
- Crank, M. (2002) Managing and valuing contact with contesting birth families. In: Argent, H. (2002) *Staying Connected: Managing Contact Arrangements in Adoption*, London: BAAF.
- Crittenden, P. M. (1995) Attachment and psychopathology. In: Goldberg, S., Muir, R. and Kerr, J. *John Bowlby's Attachment Theory: Historical, Clinical and Social Significance*, New York: The Analytic Press.
- Curtis, K., Roberts, H., Copperman, J., Downie, A. and Liabo, K. (2004) 'How come I don't get asked no questions?': researching 'hard to reach' children and teenagers, *Child and Family Social Work* 9: 167-175.
- Dally, J. (1988) *The Perception of Prospective Adopters of Their Preparation for Adoption in Relation to Issues Concerning Their Children's Birth Parents*, MA dissertation (University of York).

Dance, C. and Rushton, A. (2005) Joining a new family: the views and experiences of young people placed with permanent families during middle childhood, *Adoption & Fostering* 29, 1: 18-28.

Davis, J. M. (1998) Understanding the meanings of children: a reflexive process, *Children & Society* 12: 325-335.

Denzin, N. K. (2005) Emancipatory discourses and the ethics and politics of interpretation. In: Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (2005) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., London: Sage.

Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (2005) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., London: Sage.

Department for Education and Skills (2004) *Draft Regulations and Guidance for Consultation: Access to Information (Pre-Commencement Adoptions), Access to Information (Post-Commencement Adoptions), The Registrar General's Functions*, London: the department.

Department of Health (1998) *Local Authority Circular LAC(98)20: Adoption: Achieving the Right Balance*, London: the department.

Department of Health (2001a) *Local Authority Circular LAC(2001)33: Adoption*, London: the department.

Department of Health (2001b) Press release: reference 2001/0488: Friday 19th October 2001: New adoption bill: a better future for vulnerable children, London: the department.

Department of Health (2001c) *National Adoption Standards for England*, London: the department.

Departmental Committee on the Adoption of Children (1972) *Report*, London: HMSO. (Cmnd 5107) Known as the Houghton report.

De Vaus, D. A. (1990) *Surveys in Social Research*, 2nd ed, London: Unwin Hyman.

Erikson, E. H. (1963) *Childhood and Society*, 2nd ed, New York: Norton.

Erikson, E. H. (1968) *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, New York: Norton.

Fahlberg, V. (1988) *Fitting the Pieces Together*, London: BAAF.

Farnfield, S. (1998) Attachment and the care of 'looked after' children in their middle years. In: *Exchanging Visions: Papers on Best Practice in Europe for Children Separated from their Birth Parents*, London: BAAF. Papers from the conference Exchanging Visions (1998: Bradford).

Feast, J. (2002) Adoption search and reunion: the adoptive and birth parents' perspective, *Adoption and Fostering* 26, 2: 64-65.

Feast, J., Marwood, M., Seabrook, S. and Webb, E. (1998) *Preparing for Reunion*, London: The Children's Society.

Fook, J. (2001) Identifying expert social work: qualitative practitioner research. In: Shaw, I. and Gould, N. *Qualitative Research in Social Work*, London: Sage.

Francis, P., Keaney, M., O'Neil, A. and Whitfield, G. (1992) *Aspects of Family Placement*, Leeds: Barnardo's, Yorkshire Division.

Fratter, J. (1991) Adoptive parents and open adoption in the UK. In: Mullender, A. *Open adoption: the philosophy and the practice*, London: BAAF.

Fratter, J. (1996) *Adoption with contact: implications for policy and practice*. London: BAAF.

Fursland, E. (2002) *Preparing to Adopt: a Training Pack for Preparation Groups* / devised by Pat Beesley [and others], written by Eileen Fursland. London: BAAF. Consists of Applicant's workbook, Trainer's guide, and a video.

Gilligan, R. (1997) Beyond permanence?: the importance of resilience in child placement practice and planning, *Adoption & Fostering* 21, 1: 12-20.

Glasgow Centre for the Child & Society (2005) *Code of Practice on Research Ethics: Responsibilities to Research Participants*, Rev ed, Glasgow: the Centre.

Goldstein, J., Freud, A. and Solnit, A. J. (1973) *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child*, New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

Goldstein, J., Freud, A. and Solnit, A. J. (1980) *Before the Best Interests of the Child*, New York: Burnett Books.

Grotevant, H. D. and McRoy, R. G. (1998) *Openness in Adoption*, London: Sage.

Haskey, J. (2001) Adoptees and relatives who wish to contact one another using the Adoption Contact Register: trends, relationships and proportions of records matched, *Population Trends* 106: 15-28.

Heard, D. (2001) Using extended attachment theory as an evidence based guide when working with families. In: Bell, M. and Wilson, K. *The Practitioner's Guide to Working with Families*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Heard, D. and Lake, B. (1997) *The Challenge of Attachment for Caregiving*, London: Routledge.

Hess, P. McC. and Proch, K. O. (1993) *Contact: Managing Visits to Children Looked After Away from Home*, London: BAAF.

Hill, M., Lambert, L. and Triseliotis, J. (1989) *Achieving Adoption in Love and Money*, London: National Children's Bureau.

Hilpern, Kate (2005) Families reunited, *Guardian*, 7 September 2005.

Hodges, J. and Tizard, B. (1989) Social and family relationships of ex-institutional adolescents, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 30: 77-97.

Holman, B. (2002) Families reunited, *Community Care* 22 August 2002.

Holmes, J. (1993) *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory*, London: Routledge.

Howe, D. (1996) *Adopters on Adoption: Reflections on Parenthood and Children*, London: BAAF.

Howe, D. (1998) Adoption outcome research and practical judgement, *Adoption and Fostering* 22, 2: 6-15.

Howe, D. and Feast, J. (2000) *Adoption, Search and Reunion: the Long-Term Experiences of Adopted Adults*, London: The Children's Society.

Howe, D. and Steele, M. (2004) Contact in cases in which children have been traumatically abused or neglected by their birth parents. In: Neil, E. and Howe, D. *Contact in Adoption and Permanent Foster Care: Research, Theory and Practice*, London: BAAF.

Howe, D., Brandon, M., Hinings, D. and Schofield, G. (1999) *Attachment Theory, Child Maltreatment and Family Support: a Practice and Assessment Model*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Howe, D., Sawbridge, P. and Hinings, D. (1992) *Half a Million Women: Mothers who Lose their Children by Adoption*, London: Penguin.

Howell, D., and Ryburn, M. (1987) New Zealand: new ways to choose adopters, *Adoption and Fostering* 11: 4.

Kaplan, S. and Silverstein, D. (1989) Seven core issues of adoption, *The Adopted Child* 8, 10.

Karen, R. (1994) *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and how they Shape our Capacity to Love*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Keck, G. and Kupecky, R. (1995) *Adopting the Hurt Child*, Colorado: Pinon Press.

Kirk, H. D. (1964) *Shared Fate: a Theory of Adoption and Mental Health*, New York: Free Press.

Lambert, L., Buist, M., Triseliotis, J. and Hill, M. (1990) *Freeing Children for Adoption*, London: BAAF.

Lane, M. (2005) *Introduction to the Adoption and Children Act 2002: Implications for Practice: Notes and Training*, The author. Notes for a conference.

- Lindley, B. (1998) *Partnership with Birth Families in the Adoption Process*, London: Family Rights Group.
- Logan, J. (1999) Exchanging information post adoption: views of adoptive parents and birth parents, *Adoption & Fostering* 23, 3: 27-37.
- Logan, J. and Smith, C. (1999) Adoption and direct post-adoption contact, *Adoption & Fostering* 23, 4: 58-59.
- Lord, J. and Borthwick, S. (2001) *Together or Apart?: Assessing Brothers and Sisters for Permanent Placement*, London: BAAF.
- Lowe, N., Murch, M., Borkowski, M., Weaver, A., Beckford, V., and Thomas, C. (1999) *Supporting Adoption: Reframing the Approach*, London: BAAF.
- Lowe, N., Murch, M. and others (2002) *The Plan for the Child: Adoption or Long-Term Fostering*, London: BAAF.
- Macaskill, C. (2002) *Safe Contact?*, Lyme Regis: Russell House.
- McCracken, G. (1988) *The Long Interview*, Newbury Park (California); London: Sage.
- McWhinnie, A. (1994) The concept of open adoption: how valid is it? In: McWhinnie, A. and Smith, J. *Current Human Dilemmas in Adoption*, Dundee: University of Dundee.
- Main, M. (1995) Recent studies in attachment: overview, with selected implications for clinical work. In: Goldberg, S., Muir, R. and Kerr, J. *Attachment Theory: Social Development and Clinical Perspectives*, Hillside (NJ): Analytic Press.
- Melina, L. R. (1989) *Making Sense of Adoption*, London: Harper and Row.
- Mullender, A. (1991) *Open Adoption: the Philosophy and the Practice*, London: BAAF.

Neil, E. (2002) Managing face-to-face contact for young adopted children. In: Argent, H. *Staying Connected: Managing Contact Arrangements in Adoption*, London: BAAF.

Neil, E. (2003) Adoption and contact: a research review. In: Bainham, A. et al. *Children and their Families: Contact, Rights and Welfare*, Oxford: Hart Publishing.

Neil, E. (2004) The 'Contact after Adoption' study: indirect contact and adoptive parents' communication about adoption. In: Neil, E. and Howe, D. *Contact in Adoption and Permanent Foster Care: Research, Theory and Practice*, London: BAAF.

Neil, E. and Howe, D. (2004) *Contact in Adoption and Permanent Foster Care: Research, Theory and Practice*, London: BAAF.

Neil, E. and Thoburn, J. (2000) Contact after Adoption, http://www.uea.ac./swk/research/summaries/contact_adoption.htm, accessed on 14 March 2003.

O'Brien, K. and Wrighton, P. (2001) What social workers want from research when planning for children's permanent care, *Adoption & Fostering* 25, 4: 68-70.

O'Leary, S. and Schofield, F. (1994) The right of siblings to live together, *Practice* 7, 1: 31-43.

Parker, R. (1999) *Adoption Now: Messages from Research*, Chichester: Wiley.

Patel, T., Williams, C. and Marsh, P. (2004) Identity, race, religion and adoption: the public and legal view, *Adoption & Fostering* 28, 1: 6-15.

Philpot, T. (1994) *Action for Children: the Story of Britain's Foremost Children's Charity*, Oxford: Lion Publishing.

Prevatt Goldstein, B. and Spencer, M. (2000) 'Race' and Ethnicity: a Consideration of Issues for Black, Minority Ethnic and White Children in Family Placement, London: BAAF.

Prynn, B. (2001) Family building in adoption, *Adoption and Fostering* 25, 1: 33-43.

Quinton, D. and Rutter, M. (1988) *Parenting Breakdown: the Making and Breaking of Intergenerational Links*, Aldershot: Avebury.

Quinton, D., Rushton, A., Dance, C. and Mayes, D. (1997) Contact between children placed away from home and their birth parents: research issues and evidence, *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 2, 3: 393-413.

Quinton, D., Rushton, A., Dance, C. and Mayes, D. (1998) *Joining New Families: a Study of Adoption and Fostering in Middle Childhood*, Chichester: Wiley.

Quinton, D., Selwyn, J., Rushton, A. and Dance, C. (1998b) Contact with birth parents in adoption: a response to Ryburn, *Child and Family Law Quarterly* 10, 4: 349-361.

Raynor, L. (1980) *The Adopted Child Comes of Age*, London: Allen and Unwin.

Reich, D. (1990) *Preparing People to Adopt Babies and Young Children*, London: Post-Adoption Centre.

Roche, H. and Perlesz, A. (2000) A legitimate choice and voice: the experience of adult adoptees, *Adoption & Fostering* 24, 2: 8-19.

Rowe, J. and Lambert, L. (1973) *Children who wait: a study of children needing substitute families*, London: Association of British Adoption Agencies.

Rushton, A. and Mayes, D. (1997) Forming fresh attachments in childhood: a research update, *Child and Family Social Work* 2: 121-127.

Rushton, A., Dance, C., Quinton, D. and Mayes, D. (2001) *Siblings in Late Permanent Placements*, London: BAAF.

Rutter, M. (1977) Separation, loss and family relationships. In: Rutter, M. and Hersov, L. *Child Psychiatry: Modern Approaches*, Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications.

Rutter, M. (1985) Resilience in the face of adversity: protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorder, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 147: 598-611.

- Ryburn, M. (1992) *Adoption in the 1990s: Identity and Openness*, Leamington Spa: Leamington Press.
- Ryburn, M. (1998) In whose best interests?: post-adoption contact with the birth family, *Child and Family Law Quarterly* 10, 1: 53-70.
- Sawbridge, P. (1991) On behalf of birth parents. In: Mullender, A. *Open Adoption: the Philosophy and the Practice*, London: BAAF.
- Schaffer, H. (1990) *Making Decisions about Children: Psychological Questions and Answers*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Schofield, G. (2001) Resilience and family placement: a lifespan perspective, *Adoption & Fostering* 25, 3: 6-19.
- Schofield, G., Beek, M., Sargent, K. and Thoburn, J. (2000) *Growing Up in Foster Care*, London: BAAF.
- Selwyn, J. (2004) Placing older children in new families: changing patterns of contact. In: Neil, E. and Howe, D. *Contact in Adoption and Permanent Foster Care: Research, Theory and Practice*, London: BAAF.
- Selwyn, J. and Quinton, D. (2004) Stability, permanence, outcomes and support: foster care and adoption compared, *Adoption & Fostering* 28, 4: 6-15.
- Shaw, I. (2003) Qualitative research and outcomes in health, social work and education, *Qualitative Research*, 3, 1: 57-77.
- Shaw, I. (2003b) Cutting edge issues in social work research, *British Journal of Social Work* 33, 1: 107-116.
- Shaw, I. and Gould, N. (2001). *Qualitative Research in Social Work*, London: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2005) *Doing Qualitative Research: a Practical Handbook*, 2nd ed, London: Sage.

Smith, C. and Logan, J. (2002) Adoptive parenthood as a legal 'fiction': its consequences for direct post-adoption contact, *Child and Family Law Quarterly* 14: 281-301.

Smith, C. and Logan, J. (2004) *After Adoption: Direct Contact and Relationships*, London: Routledge.

Smith, G. (2001) *Considering Contact; Summary of Research Evidence*. Notes for participants in a workshop at the conference *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* (Leeds: 2001).

Stone, F. H. (1969) Adoption and identity, *Child Adoption* 58: 17-28.

Stroebe, W., Stroebe, M. and Schut, H. (2003) Does 'grief work' work?, *Bereavement Care* 22, 1: 3-4.

Sturgess, W., Dunn, J. and Davies, L. (2001) Young children's perceptions of their relationship with family members: links with family setting, friendships, and adjustment, *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 25, 6: 521-529.

Sutton, A. and Hudson, B. (2005) *A Better Deal: Developing an Equitable Intercountry Adoption Service*, London: BAAF.

Sykes, M. (2000) Adoption with contact: a study of adoptive parents and the impact of continuing contact with families of origin, *Adoption & Fostering* 23, 4: 20-32.

Thoburn, J. (1994) *A Brief Review of the Research on Permanent Family Placement and Post-Placement Contact with Members of the Family of Origin*. Conference paper.

Thoburn, J. (2002) *Adoption and Permanence for Children who Cannot Live Safely with Birth Parents or Relatives*, London: Department of Health. (Quality protects research briefings; 5)

Thoburn, J. and Rowe, J. (1988) A snapshot of permanent family placement, *Adoption & Fostering* 12, 3: 29-34.

- Thoburn, J., Fratter, J., Rowe, J. and Sapsford, D. (1991) *Permanent Family Placement: a Decade of Experience*, London: BAAF.
- Thomas, C., Beckford, V., Lowe, N. and Murch, M. (1999) *Adopted Children Speaking*, London: BAAF.
- Thomas, N. and O'Kane, C. (1998) The ethics of participatory research with children, *Children & Society* 12: 336-348.
- Thomas, N. and O'Kane, C. (2000) Discovering what children think: connections between research and practice, *British Journal of Social Work* 30: 819-835.
- Tizard, B. A. (1977) *A Second Chance*, London: Open Books.
- Triseliotis, J. (1973) *In Search of Origins*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Triseliotis, J. (1974) Identity and adoption, *Child Adoption* 78: 27-34.
- Triseliotis, J. (1980) *New Developments in Foster Care and Adoption*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Triseliotis, J. (1991) Open adoption. In: Mullender, A. *Open Adoption: the Philosophy and the Practice*, London: BAAF.
- Triseliotis, J. (1994) *Openness and Contact in Adoption*, Manchester: University of Manchester. Notes for delegates on a paper presented at the conference *Adoption: Happy Ever After?* (Manchester: 1994).
- Triseliotis, J. (2000) Identity-formation and the adopted person revisited. In: Treacher, A. and Katz, I. *The Dynamics of Adoption*, London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Triseliotis, J. (2002) Personal communication.
- Triseliotis, J., Feast, J. and Kyle, F. (2005) *The Adoption Triangle Revisited: a Study of Adoption, Search and Reunion Experiences*, London: BAAF.
- Triseliotis, J., Shireman, J. and Hundleby, M. (1997) *Adoption: Theory, Policy and Practice*, London: Cassell.

Valios, N. (2001) The long goodbye, *Community Care*, 25-31 October 2001: 34-35.

Van Gulden, H. (1999) *Tools for Enhancing your Child's Sense of Value*, Minneapolis: Adoptive Family Counseling Center.

White, S. (2001) Auto-ethnography as reflexive inquiry: the research act as self-surveillance. In: Shaw, I. and Gould, N. *Qualitative Research in Social Work*, London: Sage.

Woofell, R. (2002) The rationale for qualitative methods. Unpublished typescript.