Birth Sibling Relationships after Adoption: Experiences of Contact with Brothers and Sisters Living Elsewhere

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Abstract

We examined how adoptive families manage and respond to contact with children's birth siblings living elsewhere within a nationally representative sample of 96 families who adopted a child between 01 July 2014 and 31 July 2015. We harnessed prospective, longitudinal data to determine the extent to which plans for contact between adopted children and birth siblings living elsewhere materialised over time. We present adoptive parents' views and experiences of the contact over four years, together with an analysis of factors that were thought to have prevented, hindered and/or enabled contact between adopted children and their birth siblings. The information shared by the adoptive families illustrates the challenges they faced in promoting sibling contact; in weighing up the complexities associated with managing contact in the short term against the anticipated benefit for their child in the longer term; of balancing a commitment to sibling contact with the psychological needs of their child; and of organising contact within the context of interactions with other families involved and social work professionals. On the basis of these findings, we make recommendations pertaining to the management of both letterbox and face-to-face contact and life story work, and underscore the importance of investing in sibling relationships.

Keywords: adoption, family systems, siblings, contact

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
www.basw.co.uk

Sibling relationships are reshaped by adoption (Meakings *et al.*, 2017). Children placed for adoption separately from brothers and sisters may have little or no further direct contact with their siblings and, unless placed together, they cease to have a legal relationship with each other. It is recognised that children who grow up separately from siblings and who lack contact with or knowledge about them, risk being deprived of support afforded by the sibling relationship in adult life (Kosonen, 1996; Herrick and Piccus, 2005). Although UK national guidance encourages local authorities to maintain sibling relationships, contact may diminish or be lost following adoption (Ofsted, 2012). Understanding of sibling relationships in the context of adoption is limited (Selwyn, 2019) and this is particularly true for siblings living separately. Therefore, we investigated plans and arrangements for contact between children separated through adoption, and adoptive parents' experiences and perceptions of contact between their child and their siblings living elsewhere over four years post-placement in a representative sample of British adoptive families.

Current legislation supports placing siblings together, unless their separation can be justified. Adoption legislation in England and Wales (Adoption and Children Act, 2002) sets out a requirement to consider and where appropriate plan, for contact with birth family (including siblings). Usually, contact arrangements for children are planned before adopters are identified. Plans are then presented to adopters as having been formulated in the child's best interests (Doughty *et al.*, 2019). However, there is no corresponding legal duty to execute planned arrangements, so any contact between an adopted child and a birth sibling living elsewhere is reliant on an informal agreement between the involved parties (Cossar and Neil, 2013). In the UK, contact arrangements between adopted children and birth siblings living elsewhere usually take one of two forms: (i) direct, or, face-to-face contact; and (ii) indirect, or, letterbox contact, where letters or cards (passed through an adoption agency) are exchanged between the adoptive family and the sibling(s).

In England, much of what is currently known about post adoption contact originates from the 'contact after adoption' longitudinal study by Neil and colleagues (www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption) and encompasses birth family contact, rather than sibling contact, specifically. Early findings showed that 95 per cent of adopted children with siblings were living apart from at least one brother or sister, and that 31 per cent had no contact plans with any sibling living elsewhere (Neil, 1999). Over a decade later, Cossar and Neil (2013) drew on a sample of established adoptive families with direct (open) sibling contact arrangements to explore the ways adoptive parents and birth relatives navigated sibling relationships after adoption. Their findings exposed the complex networks that existed between the families, which connected some siblings,

but not others. Contact plans were often seen as inflexible, with formalised and infrequent meetings. Adopted children needed help to make sense of their sibling connections, adoptive parents needed support in thinking about their child's contact arrangements, while siblings living elsewhere (particularly those who remained in the birth family) needed support in adjusting to alterations in the sibling relationship. Cossar and Neil recommended that research could explore the experiences of families with a more diverse range of contact arrangements.

In a recent study (Neil *et al.*, 2018), 88 per cent of adoptive parents knew of their child having at least one birth sibling living elsewhere and 37 per cent of the children placed within the previous five years had experienced indirect (two-way) or face-to-face sibling contact. Children placed for adoption over the age of two had face-to-face sibling contact more often children placed under two (35 per cent versus 15 per cent). Most adoptive parents rated children's experiences of two-way indirect contact with siblings as a negative, neutral, or mixed (75 per cent); 25 per cent rated experiences as positive. Face-to-face contact on the other hand, was considered negative, mixed or neutral by 23 per cent, and positive by 77 per cent.

The Adoption UK study on post-adoption contact in Northern Ireland (MacDonald, 2017) identified that face-to-face arrangements frequently characterised sibling contact, especially when siblings were also living in adoptive families or were fostered. *'Positive and enjoyable'* sibling relationships were reported, as were harmful experiences of contact, with siblings reportedly passing on inappropriate or inaccurate information to adopted children or modelling undesirable behaviours. The British Association of Social Workers-commissioned enquiry into adoption (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018) observed a reliance on indirect contact between adopted children and their birth families, even in circumstances where birth family were not considered a threat. They described this contact model as poorly resourced, with birth family and/or adoptive families stopping contact independently, without any formally recorded account of why. The enquiry called for a significant rethink of approaches to contact.

Current adoption practice usually carries an expectation of openness, in terms of contact between adoptive and birth families and the extent to which adoption is openly discussed within the adoptive family (Jones, 2016). Macaskill (2002) emphasised the imperative for children to understand the decisions made to separate them from their siblings, suggesting that subsequent contact could be adversely affected by children lacking insight. They also observed the difference between sibling contact and contact with adult birth relatives, noting that because sibling contact was unlikely to generate the same level of emotional fallout, it had the potential to occur more regularly. Boyle (2017) observed that adoptive

parents and children consistently identified the importance of maintaining sibling contact and children were clear in their desire to have more.

The present study

Although the importance of maintaining an adopted child's relationship(s) with their birth sibling(s) living elsewhere is emphasised in UK national guidance, very little is known about how children's plans and arrangements for contact unfold over time. To inform social work policy and practice, we aimed to provide a contemporary understanding of sibling contact experiences in a sample of children adopted from state care in the UK. We aimed to: (i) describe the birth sibling networks and associated contact experiences within a cohort of children placed for adoption between 01 July 2014 and 31 July 2015; (ii) determine the extent to which plans for contact between the adopted children and birth siblings living elsewhere materialised over time; and (iii) thematically analyse adoptive parents' views and experiences of the contact, together with consideration of matters that had influenced (prevented, hindered and/or enabled) contact between the adopted child and their birth siblings.

Method

Design

The Wales Adoption Cohort Study (WACS; Meakings *et al.*, 2017; Meakings *et al.*, 2018) used a prospective, longitudinal mixed-methods approach to understand the early support needs and experiences of 96 children adopted from state care and their adoptive families. Local authority adoption teams across Wales sent out letters on behalf of the research team to every family with whom they had placed a child for adoption from 01 July 2014 to 31 July 2015. The 96 families who returned the initial questionnaire at 4 months post-placement formed the study panel and were followed up longitudinally over four time points post-placement. The present study focuses on the questionnaires completed by adoptive parents at 4 months ($N = 96$, Wave 1) and 4 years post-placement ($N = 68$, 71%, Wave 4), and a subsample of 40 families (42%) who were interviewed at 9 months-post placement.

To determine the representativeness of the 96 families in the present study, we reviewed the social work records of all children placed for adoption by every local authority in Wales between 1 July 2014 and 31 July 2015 ($N = 374$). These records provided information about children placed during the study window, including details about known birth

sibling networks. The sample was representative of children placed for adoption during the study window in terms of child gender and past experiences of abuse/neglect, but included slightly older children because parents of sibling groups were asked to comment on their eldest adopted child (see Meakings *et al.*, 2017). Family characteristics from the social work records, questionnaire and interview samples are shown in Table 1.

Ethical considerations

Ethical permission was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University, School of Psychology. Approval from Welsh Government was obtained and permission to access local authority social work data was granted by the Heads of Children's Services. Informed consent was obtained from all participating families.

Procedure

Questionnaires

At Wave 1 and Wave 4, adoptive parents (mostly mothers, 87.5 per cent at Wave 1, 92.6 per cent at Wave 4) completed questionnaires concerning sociodemographic information and adoptive family life. In the Wave 1 questionnaire, parents answered questions about planned contact arrangements (if any) with birth siblings living elsewhere. At Wave 4, where there was contact between the adopted child and birth siblings

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of social work records, questionnaires and interview samples

	Social work records		Wave 1		Wave 4		Interview	
	(*N* = 374)		(*N* = 96)		(*N* = 68)		(*N* = 40)	
	n	%	*n*	%	*N*	%	*n*	%
Child gender								
Male	205	55	49	51	33	49	23	57.5
Female	169	45	47	49	35	51	17	42.5
Child age (at placement)								
Under 12 months	94	25	24	25	15	22	9	22.5
12–47 months	196	52	42	44	32	47	18	45
48 months+	84	23	30	31	21	31	13	32.5
Child ethnicity								
White British	353	94	91	95	66	97	38	95
Other	21	6	5	5	2	3	2	5
Adopter status								
Heterosexual couple	n/a	n/a	79	82	54	79	31	77.5
Same sex couple	n/a	n/a	5	5	4	6	3	7.5
Single adopter	n/a	n/a	12	13	10	15	6	15

living elsewhere, adopters outlined their experiences and associated support needs. The families were also asked to describe any changes to the original sibling contact plan.

In-depth interviews with adoptive parents

Forty participants agreed to be contacted for interview at 9 months post-placement. The semi-structured interview format included a section on contact, where adopters were invited to share views and experiences of the contact arrangements between their child and birth siblings living elsewhere, including any support needed in managing contact.

Thematic analysis of sibling contact arrangements

The transcribed interviews and the open-ended responses in the Wave 1 and Wave 4 questionnaires were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved reading and re-reading all material to promote familiarisation with the data, applying codes to sections of the data to identify the salient information relevant to understanding views and experiences of sibling contact, drawing out the emerging and recurring themes in the coded data, comparing, reviewing and refining material in, and between themes to ensure the data were accurately represented, and finally, defining the parameters of the themes and analysing the content to produce a coherent account of the narratives. Once complete, quotes were attributed to themes to illustrate the data.

Results

Sibling networks of adopted children

Of the $N = 374$ children placed for adoption in the study period, 325 (87 per cent) were known to have at least one brother or sister (full or half-sibling). A third of children ($n = 122$, 33 per cent) were placed for adoption as part of a sibling group (55 pairs and four groups of three). Seventy-one per cent of these children ($n = 86$) were placed with full siblings and 21 per cent ($n = 26$) with maternal half siblings. The remaining 8 per cent ($n = 10$) of children shared the same birth mother, but the paternity of at least one child in the sibling group was unknown or not revealed. It was therefore not possible to establish whether these children were maternal half siblings or full siblings. There were no recorded cases of paternal half-siblings placed together for adoption during the study period.

Of the $N=96$ children who participated in the longitudinal study, 30 per cent ($n=29$) had been placed for adoption as part of a sibling group. Eighty-four per cent of children ($n=81$) were known to have at least one sibling living elsewhere. Of the $n=40$ in the interview sample, 25 per cent of the children ($n=10$) were placed for adoption as part of a sibling group; 90 per cent ($n=36$) had at least one birth sibling living elsewhere. Of $n=68$ who participated at Wave 4, 28 per cent ($n=19$) of the children were placed for adoption as part of sibling group, and 79 per cent had birth siblings living elsewhere (Table 2).

Contact arrangements for adopted children with siblings living elsewhere

At Wave 1, 24 per cent ($n=23/81$) of children with birth siblings living elsewhere had plans for direct contact with at least one brother or sister. Indirect contact with siblings had been proposed for a further 32 per cent of the children ($n=31/81$).

The sibling contact arrangements in place at four months into adoptive placement (Wave 1) were compared with the sibling contact reported by the adoptive families nearly four years later (Wave 4, Table 3). At Wave 4, exactly half ($n=27/54$) of the children with birth siblings living elsewhere were not in contact with any of these brother(s) and/or sister(s). In $n=15/27$ instances, this was consistent with the contact plan made at the start of the adoptive placement, but for the other 12, it was a departure from what had been agreed.

Plans for direct contact had mostly materialised. Of 19 children with face-to-face contact plans, 14 were seeing their siblings 4 years post-placement. Two other children, whose original plans did not include direct sibling contact, had since had face-to-face contact with siblings. The biggest discrepancy between the contact arrangements that had been planned and those which were occurring, involved indirect contact: $n=11/17$ children with plans for indirect contact with siblings had no contact at Wave 4.

Table 2 Sibling characteristics derived from social work records, questionnaires and interview samples

	Social work records ($N=374$)		Wave 1 ($N=96$)		Wave 4 ($N=68$)		Interview ($N=40$)	
	n	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*n*	%
Birth sibling(s) living elsewhere	274	79	81	84	54	79	36	90
Sibling group placement	122	33	29	30	19	28	10	25

Table 3 Contact arrangements with birth sibling(s) living elsewhere

	Sibling contact reported (4 years post-adoptive placement)				
	Direct contact with at least one sibling	Indirect contact with at least one sibling	No contact with any sibling	N/a (no siblings living elsewhere)	Total
Sibling contact planned (4 months post-adoptive placement)					
Direct contact with at least one sibling	14 (74%)	4	1	n/a	19
Indirect contact with at least one sibling	0	6 (35%)	11	n/a	17
No sibling contact planned	2	1	15 (83%)	n/a	18
N/a (no siblings living elsewhere)	n/a	n/a	n/a	14	14
Total	16	11	27	14	68

Note: Percentages in brackets show sibling contact reported at 4 years post-adoptive placement that was in line with contact planned at 4 months post-adoptive placement.

The findings that follow from the interviews and open-ended responses in the Wave 4 questionnaire, highlight the varied opportunities and diverse experiences of sibling contact in the cohort of adopted children. It should be noted that sibling contact arrangements were often complex. Many children had more than one sibling and, not unusually, contact experiences differed between each sibling dyad. Analysis of the data generated four themes, by which the range of circumstances that prevented, hindered or else enabled positive experiences of sibling contact, could be better understood. These comprised: (i) talking openly about adoption; (ii) children's reactions to contact; (iii) support for contact and (iv) rapport between families.

Talking openly about adoption

Attitudes and beliefs about adoption varied widely amongst adoptive parents, influencing the extent to which they wanted (or were able) to openly communicate with children about their lives and connections to both adoptive and birth family. Brodzinsky (2005) described the practice of exploring the meaning of adoption within the adoptive family as 'communicative openness'. Two key elements of the process involve communication with the adopted child about adoption and the promotion of their dual connection (Neil, 2009). Several parents shared the difficulties they faced (or anticipated) in balancing efforts to bond as a newly formed adoptive family against the need to promote the importance of the birth family. There were some concerns about the threat this posed to the stability of the adoptive family. One father observed:

> We're trying to build up this family unit, but you've still got to keep bringing in all these other people (Interview).

There appeared to be parallels between greater levels of 'communicative openness' and the maintenance of sibling contact over time. This is illustrated in the following quotes from adoptive mothers where both families had agreed to indirect contact with their child's siblings. At Wave 4, indirect contact had been maintained in Family A:

> I can see how, in terms of identity and working out where your roots are and who you are, contact is really important. I like the life story idea... it's trying to find that balance between giving the child enough information so that they know who they are and they understand their identity and that they've got a joint identity really... we don't want [Child] ever to come to us and say, 'You didn't keep up contact with my siblings'. We want to do the right thing by her (Family A, interview).

In contrast, all contact had ceased in Family B:

> We'll do it (indirect contact with siblings) because that's what we have agreed. Actually, I think it's really difficult. I know social work theory says it's really important all the rest of it, I'm not so sure it's very good to have a constant reminder that he has siblings and is now an only child... I think most adoptive parents would tell you that the whole contact thing is very emotive, and you do what you have to do. Do you want to do it? Absolutely not. You want your child to move on and know that they have these siblings but actually, to forget about it and move on because it really doesn't do them any good (Family B, interview).

Life story work

Life story work is intended to help provide adopted children with an age appropriate, coherent narrative of their life experience. It may include working with children to help them learn more about their birth sibling networks and to help them better understand the reasoning behind decisions to place them apart from brothers and/or sisters. At Wave 4, $n = 16/68$ (24 per cent) of the adoptive parents identified an unmet need for professional help with life story work. Nine of the 68 (13 per cent) families had still not received their child's life story book and $n = 12/43$ (28 per cent) parents who had used the book with their child rated it as unhelpful. Parents complained about inappropriate, missing and inaccurate information.

At Wave 4, 7 per cent (5/68) of parents had not yet spoken to their child about adoption. Others had not talked about the existence of birth siblings or had shared very little information about them. This complicated plans for sibling contact; there were instances where contact had not happened because of the children's insufficient understanding of their life history. Some parents had wanted to honour their promise to retain contact with siblings, so had written without involving their child. Others had received communication from siblings, which they had not shared with their child for fear of confusing, unsettling or upsetting them:

> We had a letter at Christmas time which we haven't shown to [Child] or anything yet because to be honest with you it's a bit, bit heart-breaking. It comes from one of his older siblings. Because again, we've not known when to introduce any of this sort of stuff (Interview).

Nevertheless, the absence of life story work was not always a barrier to contact. One mother explained how her daughter met regularly with

her sister, believing that they were just friends. The mother planned to 'gap fill' when her child was older. The adequate preparation of children for direct contact was considered important. Some contact had been complicated by the children's difficulties in coming to terms with their new circumstances and reconfigured family forms.

Undeveloped sibling relationships

Parents shared varied observations about the importance of retaining contact with siblings who did not have an existing positive relationship with their child, including birth siblings born after the child was placed for adoption. For some parents, the lack of an existing bond with a sibling (including that with 'new' siblings) was considered reason enough not to invest in the relationship. Others emphasised the importance of providing their child with the opportunity for the sibling relationship to evolve. It would appear, however, that the adoption agencies did not always share this belief:

> My son has just had a half sibling born. He will be placed elsewhere. I believe they should eventually have contact, but [Child's] social worker does not seem to agree (Wave 4).

Another mother described how her family had been approached by the local authority to consider adopting their son's newborn brother. After learning about the baby's additional needs, they felt unable to do so. Nevertheless, they wanted to provide the children with an opportunity to develop their sibling relationship via direct contact. However, the local authority seemed to be offering an 'all or nothing' opportunity. They did not provide any assistance to facilitate contact, nor engage in any discussion about the possibility. Information about where their child's brother was eventually placed was withheld from the adopters.

Children's reactions to contact

A key consideration for adoptive parents in their motivation to promote sibling contact centred on judgements about how the experience affected their child emotionally. Several parents described the contact in only positive terms, others described children being both comforted and troubled by it:

> Brothers live down the road. Nice, easy loving relationship - see them once a month (Wave 4).

> My daughter becomes very anxious for weeks before contact and has
> suffered stress migraines as a result. She does however ask for contact
> and appears to enjoy seeing them for an hour twice a year (Wave 4).

Some parents expressed concerns that contact might be hurtful or destructive. Parents feared that contact with older siblings (particularly those in foster care) may upset or unsettle children by exposing them to risky behaviours, by losing interest in maintaining contact over time, by undermining the cohesion of the adoptive family, or by re-igniting their sense of loss. The access that siblings had to the birth family also worried parents because of the perceived threat posed to the safety or anonymity of their child:

> [Child] is entitled to the anonymity that adoption gives him and the new
> life that he has, so it's a big security risk [contact with an older sibling in
> touch with birth parents] and nobody seems to have grasped that
> (Interview).

However, parental fears about the harmful consequences of sibling contact were not always founded. One mother for example, who had harboured concerns about her son's emotional 'fall-out' following contact with his older brothers explained:

> When direct [sibling] contact had finished I thought I was going to have
> a real battle on my hands and I thought I was going to have a very
> upset child… and I don't know whether it was because he was happy
> thinking that I am going to let him still see them or what, but he fell
> asleep on the way home. He was the most relaxed I've ever seen him
> (Interview).

Decisions about sibling contact did not just centre on concerns about the effect on the child. Parents reported instances of contact having ceased or never commenced because their own child's presence was considered too harmful or disruptive to a sibling. The impact of contact on the welfare of other siblings in the adoptive household also concerned parents. In trying to manage the competing and conflicting needs of her two children, whilst promoting their sense of siblingship, one mother explained her decision to renege on the plan made for her son to have direct contact with his birth sister:

> We were supposed to have direct contact with his sibling, but don't want
> to because we fear it will upset our birth daughter as she thinks she is our
> son's only sister. She's had some issues since the adoption of our son, and

we don't want to make things worse for her... I'm not sure [my daughter] would be happy with another girl saying she's our son's sister (Wave 4).

More occasionally, adoptive parents described the impact of contact on their well-being, as they tried to balance the benefits of sibling contact for their child, against their own capacity to engage with arrangements. There were reports of parents being too emotionally exhausted to maintain contact, or troubled by the experience:

> I find it really difficult having contact. I get really emotional just because it's a reminder of her adoption (Wave 4).

Support for contact

At interview most parents emphasised their commitment to sibling contact, however, some felt that decisions had been imposed upon them rather than negotiated. In at least one instance, this was compounded by the assumption that the contact plans detailed at court were legally binding. Although parents acknowledged that contact plans may alter as needs change, there was a view that early negotiations with the adoption agency about proposed arrangements should be clearly recorded. At times, ambiguous documentation had led to confusion or uncertainty about the recommended plan by professionals for contact and there were instances where this had led to contact faltering:

> On the letter from the lady who is sorting out the contact she said, 'I understand your contact is via means of indirect contact by letterbox', which isn't quite true because some of it is direct contact with the siblings. But when you read further in the letter it says, 'possible direct contact with siblings', and I thought it was set in stone (Interview).

Comments made at Wave 4 revealed the different ways in which adoptive parents viewed their role in facilitating sibling contact. Some described how *they* had assumed responsibility for negotiating arrangements and had taken it upon themselves to organise contact without involving the adoption agencies:

> [Sibling contact] is being managed by us and other adoptive parents with no knowledge by social services (Wave 4).

Other parents assumed a more passive stance, placing the responsibility for organising contact on the adoption agencies. There were instances where sibling contact had not occurred because neither parents, nor the adoption agency had set plans in motion:

> We are supposed to do letterbox [indirect] contact, but no one has contacted us to do this. We don't know what to do about it (Wave 4).

Direct sibling contact

The Wave 1 and interview data highlighted the need for adoption agencies to help facilitate planned direct contact; not least by ensuring that all parties consented to the exchange of personal details. Some parents expressed frustration at the length of time it had taken for the agencies to mediate. Several parents described repeatedly prompting social workers to liaise with the families with whom birth siblings lived so that arrangements could be made. Despite promises to do so, this had not routinely happened. At nine months post-placement, just five children had seen a brother or sister living elsewhere since moving into their adoptive home. According to parents, visits had usually been arranged with minimal social work oversight. For four families, contact was beset by complications resulting from poor planning, inadequate preparation, and insufficient support. As one family explained:

> Contact was a little bit dodgy for [adopted child] because they'd changed the name of the sibling and [adopted child] found that really difficult to deal with... he wouldn't engage with the sibling. He just took himself off and sat in the Play Centre on his own (Interview).

At Wave 4, support for direct sibling contact was barely mentioned by the adoptive parents. Just one mother identified an unmet support need to help facilitate contact with a recently born sibling. It might be assumed that some of the adoptive families were coping satisfactorily with the contact experience; however, for others, it might be that plans for direct sibling contact had been abandoned.

Indirect sibling contact

Plans for indirect (letterbox) contact were prone to breaking down: $n = 11/17$ children with plans for such contact at Wave 1 had no correspondence with siblings at Wave 4. Adoptive parents shared many observations about their experiences of indirect contact. Rather than viewing involvement by the agencies in coordinating indirect arrangements as constructive, many reported unsatisfactory experiences.

The expectation by the adoption agency about the conduct of indirect contact as well parents' own expectations of the experience, appeared to influence motivation to sustain the arrangement. Parents were dissatisfied with agency protocols, viewing the convention as too rigid, superficial, or demanding. Two parents explained their reservations about indirect contact at interview. At Wave 4 neither family had maintained any form of birth sibling contact:

> I have got a problem with sitting down and doing one of them horrible naff things that most people seem to get at Christmas, you know, like a summary of our year written in the third party and all that sort of stuff... there seems to a whole lack of living and breathing around it, you know? (Interview).

> There are a lot of siblings and the local authority wanted birthday cards, Christmas cards and a letter [to each child]. I said, 'You can have all those, but you can have them all once a year, at the same time, and then you send them at the right time' (Interview).

Parents were also disillusioned by the lack of reciprocity with the indirect communication, with reports of children becoming upset or angry when they did not hear back from siblings. Others were dissatisfied by the insensitive or inappropriate content of correspondence they received (despite it having been passed through a co-ordinator in the adoption agency). Occasionally parents were themselves asked to change the style or tone of letters they had written. The receipt of letters outside agreed times was also considered difficult. Furthermore, parents were not always sure whether their letters had been passed on to siblings, or when not acknowledged by the agency, even received by those responsible for coordinating the correspondence.

> At first, letterbox [indirect] contact was good and sharing information about half siblings helped. This has dwindled in last year which certainly has not helped. My daughter is angry (Wave 4).

> [We have received] some letters and cards, but they always arrive when not agreed, always contain things they shouldn't (Wave 4).

Rapport between families

When contact was reported to be working well, parents commented on the positive relationships with the parents or carers of their child's sibling(s).

> She [Nan] is quite a forceful character, but apparently, she likes us so that's good enough for me! I think I get on alright with her, and so I think it goes alright... I usually take some photographs along, give those to Nan and say, 'They're for you to keep.' We've got each other's mobile numbers now (Interview).

Contact with other adopters was particularly appreciated:

> [Direct contact is a] very positive experience. All siblings quickly formed a bond and adoptive parents a good source of developmental information and support (Wave 4).

In contrast, contact experiences were viewed less favourably in the absence of good rapport between adults. One mother described her son's contact with his sister as 'hard going' because of the behaviour of the sibling's guardian. Another mother, who felt she had little in common with the adopters of her son's sibling, was not confident that contact arrangements would be maintained:

> I think they've quite different opinions and values to us, so it will be interesting to see [how the contact arrangements evolve]. We won't ever stop it, but I wouldn't be surprised if they do at some point (Interview).

Open communication between the families was also considered important. Several parents reported feeling frustrated by not knowing the contact intentions of the sibling's family; some did not know why contact had been refused or withdrawn. One mother said:

> I just hope that it doesn't fall through with the sister, the direct contact... the social worker who is also the sister's [social worker] wasn't quite forthcoming with some bits and pieces, so I don't know. I just hope it doesn't break down and I just hope that we can all remain in contact. Because I haven't heard anything, I didn't even get a reply or a thank you to the present I sent (Interview).

Discussion

The present study investigated the birth sibling networks and associated contact experiences of a cohort of children placed for adoption in the UK. Our findings reveal some ways social work practice can better support families to contend with the challenges faced in managing sibling contact.

Review of indirect contact

There is growing consensus that indirect contact is not meeting the needs of those for whom the arrangement is intended (e.g. Neil *et al.*, 2018). The Enquiry into Adoption (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018) heard that indirect contact is often considered too formulaic and is poorly resourced. Our findings support these assertions: parents complained about the rigidity of indirect contact arrangements, the lack of reciprocity, poor communication by the adoption agencies, and inefficient administrative processes. At four years post placement, most plans for indirect contact with siblings had not materialised. Selwyn and colleagues (2006) argued for better recognition that indirect contact co-ordination is not simply an administrative task, but one that requires skills to help clarify misunderstandings, review and explain arrangements, and encourage users to maintain contact for children's long-term benefit.

There is a need for adoption agencies to review the protocols and practices with their indirect contact procedures and to ensure that it is properly resourced. The expectations of indirect contact, from both an agency and adopter's perspective, may be explored in adopter training. Adoption support staff may find it helpful to explore with parents why arrangements fail and if appropriate, provide the necessary assistance to re-establish correspondence.

Supporting direct contact

In the main, parents were committed to supporting direct sibling contact and usually plans for such contact had materialised four years post-placement. Parents expressed their need for support *early* in the placement as they prepared to set in motion plans for meeting their child's sibling(s). There was also anxiety and uncertainty about the first sibling contact experience, for which some parents identified an unmet need for emotional support; however, this need, it is suggested, is routinely outweighed by other matters (Monk and Macvarish, 2018). Social workers may consider using the period of obligatory contact with families after placement and before the adoption order is made to ensure that parents, if they are ready, are supported to facilitate sibling contact. Further discussion among social work professionals is warranted to consider the features of best practice around supporting contact and how this can be established and maintained within teams.

Prioritising life story work

Life story work is an important component of the professional support provided to adopted children to help them integrate their past with their

present and future. It is intrinsically linked to children's post-adoption contact experiences with their birth siblings. In our study, the unmet need for professional help with life story work for a quarter of the families four years post placement is concerning. A redoubling of effort is needed to ensure that support for life story work continues to be prioritised and undertaken in a timely manner.

Investing in sibling relationships

There are important ethical considerations associated with decisions to dismiss contact between children and their siblings, where the relationship pre- and post-adoption is considered unestablished or non-existent (e.g. siblings born after children are placed for adoption). Our findings suggest that sometimes adults (parents and social workers) expressed little motivation to nurture these immature relationships. This is corroborated by Neil *et al.*, (2018), who noted sibling contact occurred more often among children over the age of two when placed for adoption, than among those who were younger. Given that adoption disrupts the natural evolution of birth sibling relationships for many children, and that children may be placed for adoption before formation of a sibling bond, it seems difficult to justify dismissing contact simply because a sibling relationship was not sufficiently established at the point the child was placed for adoption. Beckett (2018) observed the significance children who have never lived together can attach to the sibling relationship. Research findings converge on the importance of recognising that children's needs for contact will change over time, which requires the possibility of contact remaining viable. Consideration should therefore be given to investing in sibling connections that have the potential to evolve into meaningful relationships.

Although the present study focuses on adopted children's contact with siblings living elsewhere, support for other types of sibling relationships must also be considered, such as those created through adoption. Evidence suggests that rates of adoption disruption are higher in families with existing birth children (Wedge and Mantel, 1991), and the support needs of existing birth children are often overlooked (Meakings *et al.*, 2017). More work is needed to establish how best to prepare and support all children as they transition to their new family arrangement.

Beyond establishing and maintaining contact with siblings, further attention must also be paid to supporting quality sibling relationships. Although sibling relationships are commonly characterised by both positive and negative dimensions, it is well-established that warm, harmonious sibling interactions are related to positive outcomes in childhood and later life (Feinberg *et al.*, 2013). Given that in England and Wales most children enter care following abuse and neglect (DfE, 2016; Welsh

Government, 2016), children who lived together pre-adoption may share a history of maltreatment (Selwyn et al., 2015), yet knowledge about the effects of abuse and neglect on the quality of the sibling relationship remains sparse (Katz and Hamama, 2018). Although some siblings may find contact after adoption a source of comfort and reassurance (Meakings *et al.*, 2017), sibling relationships in adoptive families who have experienced a disruption or are in crisis, can be harmful (Selwyn, 2019). The need to engage in judicious social work and professional practice as part of post-adoption support is clear.

Social media did not emerge as an immediate concern, but several families were worried about the future. Adopted children's online presence may provide opportunities to contact, or receive contact from, siblings living elsewhere. Although some evidence suggests that online networking may have positive outcomes, the unpredictability and immediacy of (particularly unwanted) online contact may have harmful consequences (Greenhow *et al.*, 2015). Further research regarding experiences and support needs of adoptive parents and adoptees in managing relationships with siblings online is a priority. In addition, children's experiences were reported via their adoptive parents. Future work should consider eliciting the views and experiences of adopted children and young people directly.

Conclusion

Our findings show the importance of adequately supporting and enabling adoptive parents to engage in and facilitate contact on behalf of their children, to ensure that relationships between siblings living apart are managed in a way that are as rewarding as possible for all involved. Sibling relationships should not be jeopardised by communication and collaboration impediments that occur between adoptive families and social work professionals. Considerable value may therefore be derived from including increased content as part of social work qualification and continuing professional development programmes about the psychological functions of sibling relationships, together with implications for child development and identity formation. This activity could be integrated with existing content about the value of life story work, the functions of direct and indirect contact and young people's engagement with social media. Future research could also consider how social work practitioners can work with families to sustain safe and meaningful sibling relationships in a manner that can be realistically achieved. Staying in contact with brothers and siblings may help children develop a better understanding of their origins and identity and lay the foundations for relationships that have the potential to support them for life.

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