

Shadows Reflections and Tattoos : Messages from contact with complex birth families

As an adopter, I feel life story processes and contact are at the heart of helping young people with their identity, but also of cementing our own relationships with our children.

We can be fearful and reluctant around these issues. I started my own adoption journey with many of the fears and anxieties shared by others.

"Identity is the soul of the person. The adoption process is like having your soul written on a piece of paper and given to someone else."

Pauline Black (who was in a band called "Selector" many years ago) writes in "Black by Design" about her experiences of trans-racial adoption.

"We have to move away from the protective nature of parenting towards more meaningful relationships and understanding for the children."

G. DesForges adoptee, discussing openness in adoption, when 17

I feel we cannot talk about contact without considering life story processes, they are inextricably linked.

With all the learning from attachment theory and brain imaging towards 'parenting the brain', do we sometimes lose sight of the importance of identity and life story development? Do we really grasp the therapeutic role of contact as integral to this?

From my vantage point over the past couple of decades, I have observed inconsistencies across the country and from different professionals regarding contact. Contact is often a point of key contention in adoption.

It is right to be cautious about contact. We do need to explore risks and the implications of contact, but we also need to examine our own fears and motives and how these are not always helpful to the children / young people.

With the growth in social media etc, we have to accept the reality that adopted young people and birth family can make contact out of our control. This does not have to be devastating and detrimental.

Life Story Processes

Healthy children are curious and it is healthy for children and young people to be curious.

Some adopters struggle with the importance of laying the foundations of life story development from the beginning of the relationship. I often hear adopters talking about waiting for children to be settled, or until they understand, or waiting for the children to ask questions.

As parents we have responsibility to help shape our children's world. Of course we want to protect our children, but we do not live in a safe world and we do not have that power. The important thing is to try and help our children negotiate the world as safely and healthily as possible – to live alongside the challenges of their lives and help develop resilience, through developing understanding and skills. With experience, I have come to accept that young people who come from trauma will go on to experience more trauma in different ways. Sometimes this can even help them

Validates loss and displacement – makes it real and may help to alleviate loss through a sense of connection and possibilities for the future.

Can help to make sense of memory fragments.

Can help children raise questions, which may not otherwise come to mind.

Helps prevent unrealistic fantasy.

Contact can be a witness to change. I.e. as the children's lives change, so often do the birth families'. If we rely only on static historical information written on CPRs etc. this can become out of date, out of context and hard to relate to.

Identity – helps children and young people have a more integrated sense of who they are over time

Offers a reflection of themselves

Offers reassurance about family members

Helps give us clues to understand experience and behaviour

If adopters help children/ young people with contact, this can be part of preparation towards adulthood and skills for life, understanding relationships, choosing safe and reliable relationships, accepting people have strengths and weaknesses.

Managing mixed feelings. Young people will often express polarised views at different times. Helping them understand that it is ok to have mixed feelings about birth family and - about adoptive family

Accepting and acknowledging the whole child – truly unconditional.

As parents we want to protect children from being let down again, but if birth parents can't follow through – that can be helpful information in itself for the children about where the parent is at, as long as we support the child through this process.

Importance of contact with fosters carers, their children and other foster children - not only helpful for keeping people in children's lives, it can be a way of revisiting and gathering further information.

What helps to make contact possible and valuable?

Contact should be informed. It is important to be real about birth families. People sometimes get confused about this, I think. You can give very real information about birth parents, which is indeed distressing, but you can still have and show empathy for them.

It is really important that we are given as much information as possible about birth parents own experiences so that we can explain why they struggled to be parents, in a way that also makes it clear that the children are not responsible for their experiences.

This also shows that if we as adopters have empathy for their birth parents, they can trust that we will also have empathy for our children – whatever mistakes they make.

Sometimes I think we value the wrong things - focus too much on happy, settled, safe –repressing and suppressing the real issues and needs of the children/young people, because it is too uncomfortable for the adults.

It is important for professionals to work alongside adopters in an enabling way regarding contact and life story.

Planning for contact – how much can we really plan for contact? Very little of the contact I have sought out was initially planned for. I sought this out as my children's needs changed.

It is valuable to help parties with the preparation for planned contact at the point of placement e.g. introducing and helping adopters of separated siblings to create shared understanding of the importance of contact and the need to talk to the children.

There is real strength in adopters who have had to work through complex difficulty and conflict in their own families. This kind of resilience is often particularly helpful for adopted young people negotiating their own birth family.

It is helpful when adopters have support networks that understand the importance of birth family for the children.

Being an adoptive parent is very different to being a birth parent. This needs to be accepted and valued.

The keys issues which make it different are not so much biology, but the child's need for ongoing acceptance and explanation of their experience and birth family and - where this is at all possible contact.

Conclusions

Adoption is incredibly complex. Each child's experience will have particular nuances. Sometimes in our struggles with this complexity we may search for simplistic meanings or solutions, which then further displace the young people.

The reality of social networking is here. Contact may well be instigated by young people or their birth families out of our control. There may be fears, anxieties, protectiveness and defensiveness that may not be helpful for the children in the long term. We are all going to make mistakes, but it is important to be reflective and empathic.

Children may fantasise about their birth families, but birth family may well also fantasise about their children and the adoptive families. This won't always be the case, but I have found that when I have met birth family members with the children, they are relieved somehow and this in itself can diminish the perceived threat or competition.

It is important to keep doors open. Contact can be a way to help young people negotiate which relationships may be safe, or not, towards independence. If they haven't had this support earlier on, they may make more unsafe judgements about contact into adulthood. The important thing is that they explore these issues while they do have support, boundaries and a safe environment from which to do this.