

Adoptive Families: Longitudinal Outcomes for Adolescents

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Introduction

This report summarizes the findings and implications of a longitudinal follow-up study of adoptive families experiencing different levels of openness in their adoptions. *Openness* refers to a continuum of contact and communication among members of the adopted child's family of birth and family of rearing. The continuum ranges from *confidential* (no contact and no identifying information shared) to *mediated* (communication occurs, but is relayed without identifying information through a third party such as an adoption agency) to *fully disclosed* (communication and contact occur directly between parties). Considered together, the members of the child's extended families of birth and rearing comprise the *adoptive kinship network*. Following a description of the project's aims, this report briefly outlines the project's major conclusions and then discusses implications for the development of the field, directions for future research, and implications for adoption practice and policy. The report also includes a list of publications, presentations, and media contacts that have been made during the period of the grant. The appendix to this report includes copies of articles and a detailed statement regarding the project's methodology (participants, procedures, and measures).

The overarching purpose of the research presented in this final report is to investigate the development of adjustment in adolescents who have grown up in adoptive families in which connection with birthfamily members varied in terms of contact and communication. A large body of research has documented the higher risk for psychopathology among adolescents from adoptive families. However, little of this research is longitudinal and virtually all of it was conducted with families experiencing confidential adoptions, which are no longer typical in U.S. adoption practice. Given the rapid movement toward more openness in adoption, it is possible that this entire literature is no longer relevant to understanding the issues facing adopted children and their families. This is one of the gaps in the literature that motivated this research.

The research is a longitudinal follow-up of Grotevant and McRoy's nationwide sample of 190 adoptive families experiencing different levels of openness in adoption who were first seen between 1987 and 1992, when the children were between the ages of 4 - 12. At Wave 2, with funding from the Foundation, the children ranged from 12 - 20 and were interviewed once again in their homes with their families.

Within this broad purpose, the current project has three specific aims:

1. To use longitudinal data to test a model predicting **adjustment in adopted adolescents**, from data concerning openness in adoption, adoptive family processes, family relationships, and adjustment during middle childhood, and openness in adoption, adoptive family processes, family relationships, and identity during adolescence. A key contribution of the study is consideration of identity as a factor mediating the link between family processes and developmental outcomes.

2. To examine **changes in adoption openness** that have occurred for adopted adolescents between middle childhood and adolescence, focusing on the characterization of openness trajectories, the family processes that predict them, and the developmental outcomes they predict.

3. To conduct cross-sectional comparisons of **identity in adopted adolescents** experiencing different levels of openness across early, middle, and late adolescence.

These aims are addressed in the four sets of major conclusions that follow.

Major Conclusions

1. Both positive and problematic adjustment among adopted adolescents are linked to relationships within their adoptive families as well as to the quality of the connections across the adoptive kinship network in which the adolescent is a member.

- When the study children were in middle childhood, the strongest predictor of problematic adjustment outcomes (internalizing and externalizing) was the *parent's perception of the child's incompatibility with the family*.
- Looking longitudinally, we found that higher degrees of perceived compatibility maintained from middle childhood to adolescence were associated with higher degrees of *psychosocial engagement* (defined as adolescents' active use of inner resources to interact positively with others in family, peer, and community contexts) and attachment to parents and lower problem behavior. The results were similar for male and female adolescents and regardless of whether compatibility change patterns were derived from mothers' or fathers' perceptions.
- When children were involved in adoptive kinship networks involving contact with birthfamily members, child adjustment was related not only to qualities of relationships within the adoptive family but also to *collaboration in relationships* between the adoptive parents and birthfamily members involved in contact. Collaboration in relationships is an emergent property of the adoptive kinship network, characterized by the ability of the child's adoptive and birthparents to work together effectively on behalf of the child's well-being. It involves collaborative control over the way in which contact is handled and is based on mutual respect, empathy, and valuing of the relationship.
- In general, the degree of openness in the adoption was less predictive of outcomes for children or adolescents than was the quality of the child's relationships within the adoptive family and the adoptive kinship network.

2. The level of openness in most adoptions (confidential, mediated, fully disclosed) remained the same from middle childhood to adolescence, but there were frequently changes in the degree of contact within openness level.

- During childhood and early adolescence, the adoptive mother (in two parent families) played the primary role in managing contact with birthfamily members. As time went on, the responsibility for contact tended to shift from adoptive mother and birthmother to adopted child and birthmother. In general, adoptive fathers were less involved than mothers in this process across time.
- Adoptive parents were more satisfied when birthmothers respected their family's boundaries and let the adoptive family initiate most of the contact.
- When there were decreases in openness in adoptive kinship networks, the birthmothers and adoptive parents tended to have incongruent accounts regarding who initiated discontinuation of contact and divergent understandings about why contact stopped.
- In general, adolescents who had contact with birthmothers reported higher degrees of satisfaction with their level of adoption openness and with the intensity of their contact with birthmother than did adolescents who had no contact. Satisfaction with adoption openness was lower during middle adolescence (ages 14-16) than during early or late adolescence.

3. Communication within the family about adoption is a process that unfolds over time, with adoptive parents initially taking the lead and with their children playing an increasingly important role as they move toward and through adolescence.

- Distinctive phases of the family communication process can be discerned: the first, in which adoptive parents provide their children unsolicited information; the second, in which parents respond to their children's curiosity by answering or withholding information; and the third, in which children take control of finding their own information. Each phase plays a unique role in the family's evolving narrative about the adoption, provides opportunities for meaning-making about the adoption, and provides a context in which the adoptive parent-child relationship is strengthened or weakened.

4. Adoptive identity, the sense of oneself as an adopted person, emerges during adolescence and is related to qualities of relationships within the adolescent's family.

- Several distinctive patterns of adoptive identity were apparent during adolescence:
 - *developed integrated positive narrative*: a coherent, integrated narrative in which adoptive identity was highly salient and viewed positively.
 - *underdeveloped narrative of denial of difference*: narrative in which adoptive families were viewed as no different from biological families, and adoptive identity was low in salience for the adolescent, although moderately positive.
 - *underdeveloped narrative of adoption as difference*: narrative in which adoptive families were viewed as different from biological families, but adoptive identity was not extensively explored, salience was low, and affect was moderately positive.

- *developed negative narrative of adoption as difference*: a coherent, integrated narrative marked by high exploration of adoptive identity, high salience, and strong negative affect.
 - *unexplored and unimportant adoption narrative*: a narrative showing little or no exploration of adoptive identity, low salience, and little positive or negative affect.
- Patterns of adoptive identity differed widely across adolescents, although in general, more positively resolved patterns were found among older rather than younger adolescents and girls rather than boys.
 - Differences in adoptive identity or degree of preoccupation with adoption were not related to the level of openness in the adolescent's adoption.
 - Adoptive identity development typically involves a phase when adoption issues are particularly salient, involving intense reflection and emotional engagement, perhaps preoccupation on the part of the adolescent. When this occurs, it may be accompanied by the adolescent's temporary emotional withdrawal from the adoptive family. On average, girls' levels of preoccupation were higher than boys'.

Implications for Development of the Field

- Much of the research on adopted adolescents and their families focuses on the negative, such as the higher rate of psychopathology among adoptees, the risk of disrupted placements, and the trauma of searching for birthparents. The current research argues for the value of a strength-based approach to adoption. Rather than focus exclusively on psychopathology, the field needs to address the development of strengths in all members of the adoptive kinship network. Our research on the development of *psychosocial engagement of adolescents, compatibility in parent-adolescent relationships, and collaboration in relationships among adoptive and birthparents* addresses positive outcomes and processes that need further investigation.
- Adoption should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a discrete time-bound event. Our work has traced children's emerging understanding of the meaning of adoption into the development of adoptive identity during adolescence. Furthermore, we have noted the dynamic nature of relationships among the adults in the child's life, arguing that maintenance of contact after adoption requires a commitment to making ongoing relationships work, despite their inherent ups and downs.
- The dynamics of adoptive families have unique features but also share much in common with those of other complex family forms involving relationships beyond the nuclear family. Thus, the emerging literature on adoptive families can inform our understanding of relationships in other types of families, such as those created through reproductive technology, in which the child's birthfather may be unknown, or blended families, in which relationships must be negotiated between the child's noncustodial biological parent and the child's custodial parent and new spouse.

- The field will benefit from more interdisciplinary training and research opportunities. The conclusions yielded by our project have drawn on perspectives from the fields of family science; psychology (especially developmental, clinical, and school); social work; family therapy; sociology; and public policy. Such interdisciplinary work requires opportunities and funding for training of students and collaboration among professionals.
- Understanding of adoptees and adoptive families must be conceptualized within historical and cultural context. Although societies through time have had mechanisms to provide homes for children whose biological parents are unable to care for them, the practice of legally terminating parental rights of the child's birthparents and transferring them to another set of parents is a relatively recent, western practice. More immediately, recent changes such as increasing openness at placement, changing laws concerning the adoptee's access to identifying information and birth certificates, and "underground" social movements supporting search and reunion also provide context for this research.

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Directions for Future Research

- Further explication of the construct of *parent-child compatibility* is needed, with a focus toward understanding how it evolves over time and its consequences for the adolescent's future – including the model of relationships that the young adult adoptee internalizes and takes into subsequent intimate relationships. This construct also merits investigation within nonadoptive families.
- The FAC (family adoptive communication) model needs to be extended into adolescence and young adulthood, now that we better understand how the responsibility for post-adoption contact shifts from the adoptive mother and birthmother to the adopted adolescent and birthmother.
- Further study is needed of the relation between adoptive identity and the other domains in which identity development occurs – both those that are chosen (e.g., occupation, religious values, relationships) and those that are assigned (e.g., ethnicity, gender).
- Future work should expand the range of outcomes examined to include relational outcomes, such as the development of close relationships with peers.
- Further research is needed for development of a dynamic process-oriented model of change in openness over time. How are such changes negotiated? How is meaning about such changes negotiated within the family?
- The importance of the construct *collaboration in relationships* has been clearly established in this research. Future research with this construct should attempt to unpack this construct so that it can be more readily used in

assessment, education, and intervention with adoptive kinship network members.

- Investigation into the dynamics of sibling relationships in adoptive families should be undertaken, especially in families in which adopted siblings experience different levels of openness and in families having both adopted and biological children.
- Further research should explore circumstances in which adoption openness might not be advisable.
- The adolescents from this longitudinal project need to be followed up as they make the transition to early adulthood, since attainment of the age of majority (in many states) brings with it the right for adoptees to obtain identifying information about their birthparents. What differentiates adopted adolescents who seek such information or search for their birthparents from those who do not? What roles have their adoptive parents played in this process, both during childhood and adolescence? Is searching related to characteristics of adoptive parents such as personality and mental health? How is searching related to adjustment outcomes and adoptive identity development for adolescents? Does greater openness in adoption buffer adolescents from problematic socioemotional outcomes, since secrecy and uncertainty regarding their origins are less than in confidential adoptions?

Implications for Adoption Practice and Policy

- Changes in practice and policy regarding post-adoption contact should be based on research findings, now that a critical mass of such knowledge is emerging from this and other projects.
- The construction of a sense of compatibility of the child with the adoptive family may be a challenge, as there is neither biological tie nor physical resemblance on which to base it. Yet, perceived compatibility can be successfully established in adoptive families and is an important predictor of both child and adolescent adjustment. Clinicians should be attuned to the possibility of problems in this area, and professionals offering post-adoption services should develop programs that address this issue. Discussion of the importance of compatibility and how to foster its development can be woven into educational programs for adoptive parents.
- Parents' and adolescents' reports of adolescent problem behavior diverge in some predictable ways. When the relationship between parent and adolescent is closer, their reports are more likely to be congruent. Therefore, in working with families experiencing adolescents' behavior problems, it is important to solicit views from multiple family members and explore the meaning of differences that might emerge.

- Since the process of communication about adoption unfolds within the family in predictable ways, educational programs should be developed to acquaint adoptive parents about these developmental patterns, and clinicians should explore the history of the family's communication about adoption as an early part of the therapeutic process.
- The normal process of adolescents' development of a sense of "who I am as an adopted person," or adoptive identity, is quite varied. It may be marked by intense positive and/or negative affect, preoccupation, temporary emotional withdrawal from the family, and active exploration of relationships outside the adoptive family. Since there are such wide individual differences, parents of more than one adopted child should not assume that their children will experience identity development in the same way. Similarly, school personnel and clinicians should be acquainted with the diversity of ways in which adoptive identity may be explored. Support groups for adolescents exploring identity issues should be normalized and available.
- Collaboration in relationships between a child's adoptive parents and birth parents plays a key role in successful management of contact and predicts positive socioemotional development for the child. Educational and therapeutic interventions based on this information should be designed for both adoptive parents and birthparents.