

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of East Anglia		
Unit of Assessment: 20 - Social Work and Social Policy		
Title of case study: Making adoptions more open: enabling birth family contact nationally and internationally		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000 - 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Prof. Elsbeth Neil	Professor	1999 – to present
Dr Mary Beek	Research Fellow	5 separate fellowships 1997 – 2020
Julie Young	Senior Research Fellow	2001 – to present
Dr Jeanette Cossar	Associate Professor	2006 – to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Child adoption traditionally involved a severance of contact between birth and adoptive families, resulting in unresolved losses and identity problems, particularly for the adopted person. There has been reluctance in policy and practice, both in the UK and abroad, to move towards more open adoptions. UEA research has provided an evidence base about post-adoption contact, shifting entrenched policies and cultures and enabling more open adoptions.</p> <p>UEA research is widely cited in the statutory guidance on adoption in England and has informed case law establishing the need for research-informed court decision making. It has changed, and is continuing to change, professional attitudes, knowledge and practices. The research has been used to develop practice tools to enable these changes and these have fostered more open staff and adopter attitudes, leading to more adopted children having positive contact with birth relatives.</p> <p>In Germany, the research has informed new adoption legislation enabling open adoption. In Ireland it has led to recommendations in a governmental review to allow open adoption. In New South Wales, where open adoption is now legally mandated, the research has informed guidance and action research, building practitioner competence in facilitating birth family connections.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Adoption is an age old and worldwide practice of caring for children who cannot be brought up by their birth parents, though the uses and legal forms of adoption vary. Although voluntary infant adoption has declined, the numbers of adoptions remain significant in the UK and other countries, as children are now adopted from care. In England, 28,000 children have been adopted since 2014; for each of these children there are birth and adoptive families whose members are also affected. Closed adoption practices, where children have no contact with their birth family, were prevalent in most countries for most of the twentieth century. Having, or not having, contact after adoption is of great personal significance for adopted people, and for their birth and adoptive families. Closed adoption can cause problems with an adoptee's identity development: understanding 'who am I?', 'why was I adopted' and 'was I wanted?'. Adoptees also experience the loss of actual or potential relationships with parents, siblings and grandparents. These losses are often unrecognised and remain unresolved throughout the adoptee's life. For birth families, who are left wondering where and how their child is, closed adoption exacerbates loss, shame, guilt and mental health problems. Closed adoption also creates difficulties for adoptive parents in communicating with their child about adoption.</p> <p>Post-adoption contact has been considered from the 1990s onwards, but evidence about whether it was helpful and safe was lacking. There have been widespread fears that staying in contact with birth family could be harmful (particularly when children are adopted from care), or that prospective adopters would be deterred. UEA has produced the most comprehensive body of research on contact for children adopted from care. This evidence base comes principally from two major mixed-method longitudinal projects, incorporating surveys, standardised measures, interviews</p>		

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and economic analysis. The projects included people directly affected by adoption -- adoptees, birth relatives, adopters, and professionals -- in study design, analysis and dissemination.

The ‘Contact after adoption’ study (1996-2004) was an 18-year, 3 stage study following adopted children, birth relatives and adopters. Stages 2 (**R1**) and 3 (**R2**) were funded by the Nuffield Foundation. It is the only study of this length which includes children adopted from care.

The ‘Researching adoption support’ study (2005-2009) consisted of two linked studies: the ‘Supporting direct contact’ study (**R3**) and the ‘Helping Birth Families’ study (**R4**) funded by the (then) Department for Children, Schools and Families. In each, two waves of data were collected from adoptive parents and birth relatives and an economic analysis was conducted.

These projects have shown the benefits of contact to all parties, and the factors (including risks) that need to be taken into account. Birth family contact, particularly face-to-face contact, can help adoptees understand their identity and the reasons why they were adopted. Contact after adoption can promote more open, supportive communication between adoptive parents and children, can reassure birth family members about the well-being of the child and help them adjust to their loss, and can increase empathy and collaboration between adoptive and birth parents. The ‘Contact after Adoption’ study highlights the voice of adopted young people who expressed strong endorsement for keeping birth family connections. Contact via letterbox only, although the usual plan, is often unrewarding and challenging to sustain. The overarching messages are that direct contact should be considered for more children, that contact plans should be bespoke - taking accounts of risks and people’s strengths - and that plans should be reviewed and supported, assessing and promoting the quality of relationships between all involved.

3. References to the research (by project)

Publications and funding listed below are linked to studies (**R1-4**) described in section 2. UEA authors in bold.

- Coming to Terms with the Loss of a Child: The Feelings of Birth Parents and Grandparents about Adoption and Post-Adoption Contact. **Neil, E.**
Adoption Quarterly, **2006**, 10 (1), pp. 1-23. DOI: 10.1300/J145v10n01_01 (**R1**)
- Post-adoption contact and openness in adoptive parents’ minds: Consequences for children’s development. **Neil, E.**
British Journal of Social Work, **2007**, 39(1), 5-23. DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcm087 (**R1**)
- Contact after adoption: a longitudinal study of post-adoption contact. London: BAAF.
Neil, E., Beek, M. & Ward, E.
CoramBAAF, **2015**, ISBN: 978 1 910039 335 (**R2**)
- Supporting direct contact after adoption.
Neil, E., Cossar, J., Jones, C., Lorgelly, P. and Young, J.
British Association for Adoption and Fostering, **2011**, ISBN: 978 1 907585 05 0 (**R3**)
- Helping birth families: Services, costs and outcomes.
Neil, E., Cossar, J., Lorgelly, P., & Young, J.
British Association for Adoption & Fostering, **2010**, ISBN: 978 1 905664 95 5 (**R4**)
- Rethinking adoption and birth family contact: is there a role for the law? **Neil, E.**
Family Law, (September issue), **2018**, 1178-1182. (Held on file at UEA) (**R1, R2, R3, R4**)

Research Funding

Project: Contact after Adoption – phases 2 (R1) and 3 (R2). (PI) Neil, E.

Funder: The Nuffield Foundation. Grant value: (**R1**) GBP86,441, dates 2001 - 2003; (**R2**) GBP195,495, dates 2012-2014.

Project: Researching support for birth parents (R4) and for direct contact (R3). (PI) Neil, E.

Funder: Department for Children, Schools & Families. Grant value: GBP307,163 (**R3, R4**). Dates: 2005 - 2009.

4. Details of the impact

The need for changes in adoption in England. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced a requirement to *consider* a child's contact plans when making an adoption order, and to provide services to support contact. Whilst the intention may have been to promote more direct contact, little changed in practice and letterbox remained the norm. Thus, within the existing legal framework, and where court orders for contact are rarely used and are in effect not enforceable, the burden of decision making has fallen to courts and social work practitioners. Against this difficult backdrop, Neil and colleagues worked with policymakers and practitioners to translate research findings into delivery in practice.

Impact on adoption policy in England. Although there has not been much political will to make major changes, UEA research has influenced policy debates, legislation and guidance. In 2012 the Department for Education (DfE) launched a consultation on "Contact arrangements for children" proposing a presumption of no contact for adopted children. Neil's views were specifically sought by the policy team. She submitted research summaries and a paper by the UEA team arguing this presumption of no contact would be a retrograde step. The 'no contact' presumption was later dropped. The subsequent Children & Families Act 2014 included provisions to make court orders for, or restricting, contact. Accompanying statutory guidance (July 2013, in force throughout the impact period) has a chapter on contact drawing exclusively on UEA research (**R3**, **R4**) pointing to five of the research recommendations: working with specialist providers in supporting birth parents; offering flexible services to birth parents with multiple referral routes; the need for careful planning, review and support for contact; setting clear boundaries and expectations in contact; weighing up when contact might be positive or negative. This guidance provides a framework for contact planning and management – a vital step in impacting professional practice.

Changing professional culture and practices in the UK. Professional views about direct contact have been risk averse. Contact plans have remained conservative, mostly restricted to letterbox only, separated siblings have often been denied direct contact, and the anxieties of prospective adopters have not been challenged. The need for change was highlighted in The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) report into 'The role of the social worker in adoption – ethics and human rights' (2018). One of their key recommendations was "*The current model of adoption should be reviewed, and the potential for a more open approach considered*" (**S1**, p.40). UEA research (**R1**, **R2**) is cited as *the source for developing practice* (**S1** p. 40-41, "*The work of Professor Beth Neil and colleagues at the University of East Anglia provides a useful basis for taking these developments further*")

Changes in social work practice have been boosted by UEA's collaboration with Research in Practice (RiP). The 'Contact after Adoption: resources for practitioners' website was launched in February 2017 and updated in 2019. This was co-designed with adoption practitioners and includes research and practice briefs, training materials for adopters including a video made with adopted young people, and RiP's contact planning tool, based on Neil's research (**R1**, **R2**, **R3**, **R4**). Traffic has been driven to the site via RiP memberships (170 child welfare organisations), blogs, an Observer Newspaper feature (26 March 2017) and Neil's twitter profile (1.9k followers). The Assistant Director of RiP has said "*There have been over 46,000 visits, over 10,000 downloads of materials and visitors have come from over 35 countries, with most visits from the UK...We've received a range of positive feedback about the website. For example one adoption manager emailed... '...The site and the resources it provides are long, long overdue and will be of enormous benefit to everyone in 'the adoption world'...' Prof Neil's research is the authoritative point of reference on post adoption contact, and we are pleased to have been able to work together to build practitioner awareness and understanding of the research findings...*" (**S2**).

Since 2017 the UEA team have accelerated practice changes by holding an initial five research-to-practice workshops, targeting new Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). These were delivered by Young and attended by around 300 adoption practitioners and panel members. Feedback from agency managers shows increased awareness of the research findings, willingness to consider face-to-face contact, and intentions to change adopter training. For example, the Manager of Adopt South West wrote "*The training opened up the team considerably to think about not automatically ruling out direct contact with parents, but thinking instead-is it a possibility?*" (**S4**).

Young and Neil have delivered similar workshops to a wide range of adoption agencies, local authorities and family justice boards. From early 2020 momentum has grown since the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (NFJO) focused on 'modernising contact' as a 'spotlight issue'. Neil was engaged as an academic consultant by NFJO because: "...[her] *academic portfolio, combined with her significant engagement with practice, means that she is widely regarded as the go-to academic in this field*" (NFJO Director, **S3**). Neil has advised on a scoping review of contact; carried out rapid research on children's contact in 'lockdown', which was "...*critical to shaping good practice given the widespread variation in the approach to managing contact arrangements during the pandemic*"; helped develop a prototype of a digital tool to replace outdated letterbox systems; and presented at online events disseminating NFJOs work on contact (**S3**).

Improved experiences of contact for families. Agencies who hosted UEA workshops have reported changes in practice benefitting children and families (**S4**). For example, Adoption Counts, an RAA covering five local authorities, said *[we] were inspired to make essential and urgent changes to our practice* including (a) previously 'rare' meetings between adopters and birth relatives happening in 'almost every case' (b) changing adopter training/preparation, including involving a birth mother, resulting in adopters showing greater understanding of the birth family and willingness to have contact (c) training social workers to write reports with greater empathy for birth families, setting the tone for adopters (d) supporting adopters to write more meaningful contact letters (e) a real shift of attitudes within the RAA (**S4**). Several examples of how contact plans had changed were given (**S4**): a grandfather assisted to write to his grandchild; a 13 year old enabled to receive photos of her adopted baby sister; a group of siblings, split up by adoption, could keep in touch face-to-face; a birth mother with literacy problems received voice recordings from adopters; and a 12-year old helped to reconnect with their birth mother.

Helping adoptive parents feel more positive about direct contact. Neil and Young have delivered training to adoptive parents through webinars run by AdoptionUK, workshops/webinars for CoramBAAF, two podcasts and a webcast for 'The Adoption and Fostering' podcast, whose main audience is adopters. Feedback from an adoptive mother ██████████ (**S5**) illustrates the value of this engagement with adopters writing that UEA research "...*has made an immense, and immensely positive, contribution to our adoption experience*" describing it as "*the catalyst*" for her decision to open direct contact with birth relatives. As a result of this contact "...*our boys...have a strong sense of their own narrative and identities, and a lived experience of being loved by two sets of parents. It is gratifying that both boys head into adolescence without the additional psychological baggage that often weighs heavily on adopted youngsters. ...*" ██████████ and birth mother ██████████ have developed a podcast, 'Two Good Mums', which has had over 6.5k listens since April 2019. Feedback has been "*overwhelmingly positive*" and "*prospective adopters and trainee social workers are being encouraged to listen*" (**S5**). They have now developed training materials for adopters using the UEA research. ██████████ says their experiences have recently been described by a journalist as a "*gold nugget*" and writes, "...*without a doubt, our gold was mined from your research.*" (**S5**)

Influence on UK decision making in court. Before making an adoption order, courts in England must consider the child's contact plan; this requires an understanding of research evidence. UEA research has provided the knowledge base for these decisions and is the primary reference point and training resource for lawyers and judges. Understanding and debate amongst the judiciary and lawyers has been aided by Neil's paper in 'Family Law' (2018) and via extensive training events/conference presentations delivered by Neil and Young to, for example, Scottish Judicial Institute (2015&16), Law Society Children's Committee (2018), Family Law Bar Association (2018), the President's Conference (2019), the Association of Lawyers for Children (2019), plus several local Family Justice Boards. The research has influenced the President of the Family Division, who argued in 2017 for a greater consideration of direct contact after adoption, especially with the wider family and siblings, asserting that UEA research (**R1, R2**) "...*should be required reading for us all*" (**S6**). The research (**R1, R2**) was used extensively in a case heard in the high court (Re. B (A Child) Post adoption contact, [2019] EWCA Civ 29). In a published talk at a CoramBAAF conference in 2019, the President argued that this case had established that "*the court is entitled to expect that advice from social workers and guardians will be well informed by research into the benefits or otherwise of contact*" (p.218). He referred to the "*inestimable benefit of hearing from Dr Beth Neil*" (p. 214) at the same conference (**S6**).

Impact on post adoption contact in Germany, Ireland and Australia. Open adoption policies vary worldwide and many countries have struggled to know how to change policy and practices to allow for more open adoptions. Neil has been sought out as an international expert and in the impact period has accepted invitations to speak to policy and practice audiences in Finland, Sweden, Spain, Germany, USA, Portugal, the Netherlands, Australia, Italy and Ireland.

In **Germany**, where there was no legal framework for open adoption, a project team (EFZA) at the German Youth Institute were funded by the government to inform an adoption policy review. Neil was an invited expert and presented the UEA research in Germany in 2015 & 2017. She was commissioned to review research on birth parents/contact for policy makers and practitioners in Germany, published by EFZA in 2017. This review and UEA research informed EFZA's policy recommendations. Their review of literature on open adoption cites the UEA research (**R1, R3, R4**), 31 times concluding that to enable open adoptions the German law needed to change (**S7**). Heeding this, in May 2020, the German government passed the new 'Adoption Assistance Act'. A letter from the EFZA director states *"We are highly thankful that Prof. Neil supported our project and thereby the German legislation reform. Her work has provided an invaluable contribution for the future German adoption policy."* The new law means that for the first time birth parents have rights to receive information about their adopted child, open forms of adoption have legal protection, and additional support must be provided to support open adoption (**S7**).

In **Ireland** a review of adoption policy took place in 2019. The existing legislation contained no provision for any contact after adoption: *"As such, legally speaking, adoption in Ireland is a closed process"* (**S8**, p.11). Neil was invited by the Adoption Policy Unit, Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to be the keynote speaker at an Open Policy Debate on open adoption in May 2019. DCYA's review and consultation on open adoption drew explicitly on UEA research (**R1,R2**), citing Neil's research 25 times and highlighting the 'Contact after Adoption' study as one of four featured studies (**S8**, p.26). The consultation led to recommendations for a new legal framework for open adoption. These proposals, delayed by COVID-19, are still pending.

In New South Wales (NSW), **Australia**, legislation for open adoption was passed in 2014 but research showed that practitioners lacked competence in contact practice. UEA research has helped address this gap. Neil was invited to Sydney in 2014 to give a keynote and masterclass at a national conference, run a workshop for the NSW Government, and discuss open adoption on national radio. In 2017 she was invited by the Director of the Institute of Open Adoption (IOA) (University of Sydney) to give a keynote at their inaugural Research to Practice Forum, and to speak in a public panel event, made available as part of the 'Sydney Ideas' podcast. The Director of IOA noted that Neil's research is *"widely cited by Australian government and non-governmental organisations for practice guidance regarding post-adoption contact"* (**S9**). Neil is a Partner Investigator with IOA on an Australian Research Council grant 'Fostering Lifelong Connections for Children in Permanent Care'. This current action research study is *"...utilising practices that are influenced by [Neil's] research and practice resources"* including the RiP/UEA website. This has already resulted in *"...practice changes [being] implemented with positive emerging feedback from caseworkers about beneficial outcomes for families"* (**S9**).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1 (BASW) report into 'The role of the social worker in adoption – ethics and human rights' (2018), pp 40-41.
- S2 Letter from Assistant Director of Research in Practice (15.2.21)
- S3 Testimonial from Director of Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (20.1.21)
- S4 Letters from 5 Regional Adoption Agency managers
- S5 Feedback from adoptive mother [REDACTED] from 'Two Good Mums' (7.12.20).
- S6 Lectures by The President of the Family Division in 2017 and 2019.
- S7 Testimonial letter from Director of EFZA, German Youth Institute, (22.12.20)
- S8 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) "Review and Consultation in respect of the Potential Introduction of Open or Semi-Open Adoption in Ireland.", November 2019.
- S9 Email from Director Institute of Open Adoption Studies, University of Sydney (10.02.21)