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Adoptive Family Experiences of Post-Adoption Contact in an Internet Era

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Adoptive Family Experiences of Post-Adoption Contact in an Internet Era

**Abstract**

In the UK, post-adoption contact between adoptive and birth families traditionally includes letterbox and/or face-to-face methods of communication. Due to the emphasis in the UK of adoption from the public care system, post-adoption contact is often supported and mediated by social work professionals. The growth in the use of e-communication, through for example social media, has created concerns regarding the use of such technologies for the purposes of 'virtual contact' following adoption. This paper reports the findings of a study of this emerging practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people. Findings suggest that virtual contact presents both challenges and opportunities for adoptive families. We conclude that virtual contact is complex, but with appropriate boundaries and consideration of different interests, can work well in some cases.

Key words: post-adoption contact, e-communication, virtual contact, challenges, opportunities

## **Introduction**

When adopting a child over a decade ago, adoptive parents and the social workers supporting them would never have imagined it possible for the child to be in touch with birth relatives via the Internet as they develop through childhood and into adolescence.

Communicative technologies, including social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have developed rapidly over the past decade and are becoming established media through which personal relationships are maintained or reinstated. This carries with it opportunities and risks for all technology users, however there are likely to be particular concerns within adoption practice due to the nature of adoptive family life.

Adoption creates a unique family structure centred on the adopted child's connection to two family networks, their birth and adoptive families. Adoptive families face additional challenges related to supporting the adopted child to make sense of their adoptive status across their life. This involves varying degrees of 'openness' within the adoptive family and/or between the adoptive and birth families. Openness refers to both discussions that take place about the child's connection to two families within the adoptive household and ongoing contact between the adoptive and birth families. Traditionally, post-adoption contact is supported and mediated by social work practitioners to ensure complex adoptive relationships are safely maintained. However, the growth of communicative technologies creates a potential for unmediated reconnection with birth relatives online via media such as Facebook. The debate surrounding the extent to which traditional methods of contact should be maintained and the impact this has on adoptive families, and in particular the adopted child, is ongoing. This now requires some consideration of technological methods of contact and how best to support adoptive families. It is vital that research keeps up with developing trends and practices within this field. This paper considers the risks and benefits of these emerging

practices, which we call ‘virtual contact’ developed from the term used by Fursland (2010: 20), from the perspective of adoptive parents and adopted young people.

### **Existing knowledge surrounding post-adoption contact and technology**

Post-adoption contact is now a common feature of domestic adoption within the UK, where the vast majority (72%) of children have been taken into care due to abuse or neglect (Department for Education, 2014). Given that the average age of children who are adopted is 3 years 5 months, many of these adopted children will have accumulated a history of experiences and relationships with birth relatives that necessitates the adoption being open. The ideology of openness highlights the importance of maintaining the child’s connection to their birth family, but this can be challenging due to the child’s complex history. Openness in adoption typically includes some form of contact between adoptive families and the child’s birth family (Parker, 1999; Neil, Cossar, Jones, Lorgelly & Young, 2011). To date, post-adoption contact has been conceptualised as direct (face-to-face) and indirect (letterbox) contact, and is usually mediated by an adoption agency who set boundaries, facilitate the contact and initiate changes (Henney & Onken, 1998: 46).

Practice rightly upholds the principle that post-adoption contact must be in the best interests of the child (Neil *et al.*, 2011). Adopted children often report satisfaction with mediated contact and any dissatisfaction seems to be associated with wanting increased contact (Thomas, Beckford, Lowe & Murch, 1999; Macaskill, 2002). Research has identified certain benefits for children in maintaining contact with birth relatives: (a) they are able to continue having relationships with birth relatives with whom they have an attachment (Slade, 2002), (b) contact can reassure the child that birth relatives are safe (Macaskill, 2002; Smith & Logan, 2004), and (c) contact can help the child to understand their background and reasons for their adoption (Thoburn, 2004). Of key importance to adopted children is the

provision of information gained through contact (Fratter, 1996; Macaskill, 2002; Neil *et al.*, 2011).

However, there can also be several risks inherent in contact arrangements for some children. Children who have a history of neglect or abuse can be unsettled or even re-traumatised by contact (Macaskill, 2002; Howe & Steele, 2004; Smith & Logan, 2004). The quality of contact can also be affected by the difficult or inappropriate behaviour of some birth relatives (Macaskill, 2002). Past relationships with birth relatives may not be maintained due to the often infrequent nature of contact, and therefore birth relatives and children may not be able to relate to one another anymore (Neil, 2002). Although the needs of the child should be central and paramount to contact decisions, other parties in the network can also be affected and influenced by the contact experience (Neil & Howe, 2004, Neil *et al.*, 2011).

The Internet is changing post-adoption contact and relationships, and a new form of ‘virtual contact’ has emerged (Fursland 2010: 20). Recent practice guidance in the UK has included consideration of the effective management of virtual contact in adoptive families (Adams, 2012; Fursland, 2010; Hammond & Cooper, 2013; Morrison, 2012). However, as also argued in the USA, guidance has been based mainly on anecdotal evidence (Whitesel & Howard, 2013) and the phenomenon remains under-conceptualised. In this paper we use the term ‘virtual contact’ to encompass post-adoption contact activities between adopted children and birth relatives via social networking sites, email, video calls, or text messaging.

There have been a small number of empirical studies focussing on the experience of virtual contact. These have suggested a complex interplay of risk and opportunity inherent within virtual contact. To date, the main research available has been undertaken in the USA by the Donaldson Adoption Institute (Howard, 2012; Whitesel & Howard, 2013) and in the UK through existing longitudinal research investigating the long term outcomes of contact

(MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013). Whitesel and Howard's (2013: 72) survey of over 2,000 adoptive parents, adoptees, birth relatives, and professionals found that for all parties, the benefits of the Internet outweigh the challenges, and that the Internet is now a part of adoptive family life. In contrast, MacDonald and McSherry's (2013) study, involving interviews with 31 adoptive parents in Northern Ireland, identified several risks, including the child not being emotionally ready for virtual contact and the loss of control over contact for adoptive parents. This paradox was defined as 'constrained parenthood' by MacDonald and McSherry (2013) whereby adoptive parents face a paradox of their child possessing the digital but not the emotional skills to reconnect, making it difficult for parents to provide support. Neil, Beek and Ward (2013) have recently reported the findings of Wave 3 of the longitudinal 'Contact After Adoption Study' that began in 1996. This third stage revisited 87 adopted young people aged 14 to 21 years and explored the impact of contact on their lives in adolescence and emerging adulthood and the lives of their adoptive parents and birth relatives. They discovered that alongside the more traditional contact methods explored in Waves 1 and 2, participants were also using technological methods. Virtual contact was more likely to be positive when it was used to extend existing relationships and was supported by adoptive parents. However, when it was used in an unplanned and unexpected way and when adoptive parents were not aware, virtual contact was more likely to have negative consequences (Neil *et al.*, 2013).

The study reported here is the first study solely focusing on virtual contact within families where children were adopted from public care. It forms part of a larger piece of research exploring the extent to which technological methods of contact form part of openness today and how this is experienced. The wider research also features a quantitative survey of adoptive parents and interviews with adoptive parents who have not experienced virtual contact. The interview data with families who have experienced virtual contact is the

focus of this paper. The paper aims to add to knowledge surrounding the emergence of virtual contact in the following ways: to explore the experience of virtual contact within adoptive families, to present the challenges and opportunities of virtual contact from the perspectives of adoptive parents and adopted young people, and to consider the potential practice implications.

### **Method**

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with members of ten adoptive families including 11 adoptive parents (one married couple interviewed together) and six adopted young people aged 14 to 22 years from four of the families (three siblings interviewed in one family). The researchers accessed participants who had experienced virtual contact via a survey of adoptive parents (n=2) and through adoption agencies in contact with adoptive families who had this experience (n=8). All adoptees were recruited via their adoptive parents who acted as gatekeepers. This was important to ensure that adoptee participants were supported by their adoptive parents in the study and to ensure proxy consent was gained by parents. However, this also meant that we could not access adoptees in all families as adoptive parents made the decision regarding child participation.

The interviews explored the qualitative meanings attached to virtual contact in adoptive families today and were designed to answer the question: how is virtual contact experienced in adoptive families? In particular the research aimed to explore the nuanced definitions of the risks and benefits of this form of contact. Participants were asked questions about how the virtual contact happened and how they felt about the contact. Participants were given the opportunity to be interviewed face-to-face or by telephone. The majority of interviews were carried out via telephone (11 out of 17, including three adoptees) which has been shown to be a valid alternative to face-to-face conversations (Holt, 2010). The benefits of telephone interviews have been identified as offering time and cost efficiency and



anonymity for participants (Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury, 2013), particularly when discussing sensitive issues (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). The semi-structured interviews lasted between approximately 60 and 90 minutes for parents and approximately 30 and 45 minutes for adopted young people. Participants were asked questions surrounding their experiences of virtual contact and specifically their feelings about communicative technologies as a method of contact.

Interview data were analysed in line with the approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA involves the inclusion of between 1 and 30 participants (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) to allow for ideographic accounts to surface. This is achieved through the inclusion of participant quotations. In line with the aims of this study and the principles of IPA, superordinate themes were developed from the analysis of verbatim interview transcripts and emerged as the challenges and opportunities of virtual contact. In addition, in order to code the valence of virtual contact experiences, participant responses and reactions were considered and the impact on the adoptive family (e.g. weakening of relationships, child emotional responses). In this way we were able to code family cases as broadly negative, positive or mixed with positive and negative elements.

The project was approved by Durham University's ethics committee and followed the principles of the British Sociological Association (2002). In particular all participants gave fully informed consent to take part in the research and anonymity is protected via the use of pseudonyms.

## **Findings**

The common feature of virtual contact in this study was the reciprocal nature of this open practice between adopted young people and their birth relatives. In all ten cases, there was a reciprocal exchange of information or contact. In six cases, the virtual contact was

initiated by the adoptee. In six cases, there was ongoing contact prior to the use of technology (this is contact that was happening up until the virtual contact or continued alongside it, and did not include contact that had happened in the past but had since ceased). Facebook was used in nine families (with Bebo used in one case). Texting, telephoning and video calling developed from the virtual contact in six cases, and direct contact in four cases. In nine cases the virtual contact was ongoing at the time of interview. Virtual contact involved regular exchanges initially, often reducing over time to sporadic exchanges and watching individual's profile updates online. Birth parents and birth siblings were most commonly involved. Often, however, contact with one birth relative would uncover a wider network of birth relatives, as Verity (aged 14) highlights:

But it kind of went like this, one sister then the other sister then the other sister then the other sister. Like it kept kind of slowly I got more and more sisters online.

(Verity, adoptee aged 14)

Out of ten cases, circumstances were described in broadly negative terms in six cases, two positively, and two mixed with positive and negative elements. Therefore, the challenges of virtual contact emerged as a dominant feature of most family experiences.

### **The Challenges of virtual contact**

Concerns were expressed by both adopters and adoptees regarding the potential risk to the emotional wellbeing of adopted children as a result of virtual contact. Three sets of circumstances were identified that could lead to such a risk arising including: the adoptee not being emotionally ready to deal with contact; the unmediated nature of virtual contact; and, the inappropriate conduct of birth relatives, for example, lying and inappropriately sharing information.

One of the key risks highlighted by adoptive parents, and adoptees themselves, was the negative impact the virtual contact had on the adoptee due to them not being emotionally ready to deal with the contact. Peter, aged 16, described how the virtual contact, particularly with his birth father, was getting “a bit too much”. He had started to question how safe it was to be in contact with a man he knew to be violent in his past. The reality of his birth history made Peter unsure about the contact and he seemed to be debating whether or not to continue:

I was obviously adopted for a reason, so would I really want to get back in with someone who couldn't actually look after me? I was thinking, was he actually a good person, or will he start another fight? Would he get arrested or do any things he shouldn't, and I was just a bit all over the place with him.

(Peter, adoptee aged 16)

Brenda summarised this idea by stating that adopted young people have the digital skills to perform virtual contact independently but not necessarily the emotional and social skills to positively manage this practice without support:

They have all this knowledge, and they can... whizz around computers, and whizz around phones, the buttons, you know, the texting is fast, fast. But emotionally and socially they don't know what they're doing.

(Brenda, adoptive mother)

The inappropriate behaviour of birth relatives during contact has been highlighted as a risk in more traditional methods of contact (Macaskill, 2002). However, the unmediated nature of virtual contact means that there may be a lack of professional support to manage this negative behaviour or to control it. Glenys' overall concern with the virtual contact between her daughter and her birth family was not that it was happening per se, but rather the content of communication:

I was certainly concerned... because so quickly, it wasn't just that there was contact, they were immediately saying, "We're getting you back." It was the nature of the contact rather than the contact that concerned me.

(Glenys, adoptive mother)

The unmediated nature of virtual contact means that there is a lack of professional guidance, but also the contact is less restricted due to the informal nature. Glenys describes how it was the potential for contact to be relentless that caused distress for her daughter. However, due to the desire to be in contact with birth relatives, Glenys' daughter found it impossible to stop, which is where professional guidance to restrict the contact can be helpful:

But the problem is it can happen at any time. And I think that's what our daughter finds really difficult. And the emotionally-charged things that they say are very difficult for her. But, what she can't do, is to stop the contact, you know, she finds it difficult but she can't stop it.

(Glenys, adoptive mother)

A struggle highlighted by Sue, is the powerlessness of parents to control or stop the virtual contact. Sue feels that any parental intervention could possibly be counterproductive and lead to secretive contact:

I do think it's re-traumatizing her, but I think if I was to stop her doing it she would find a way anyway because, you know, I can't stop her when I'm out. And I think it would just drive it underground.

(Sue, adoptive mother)

Virtual contact also had a negative impact when it was experienced unexpectedly. The dramatic nature of Verity's reaction when her adoptive mother, Andrea, told her that her birth mother had approached her elder sister on Facebook highlights the considerable negative

impact this contact can have. She described how she has learnt to manage the virtual contact, and things have now “calmed down” as she maintains contact with her siblings and not her birth mother. However, the initial fear in her reaction was overwhelming for her:

Well I just walked in the kitchen and my mum was like ‘your birthmum she sent [your sister] a friend request on Facebook and I think she might have sent you one’ and I don’t know why my reaction was so bad but I almost fell backwards. I jumped and was shaking and fell backwards then I was crying going ‘I don’t want to talk to her, I don’t want to be with her’ and then I got really scared and everything. But then I calmed down and thought actually I don’t have to talk to her if I don’t want to and it all calmed down. But when I first found out I was really scared, I was crying and everything.

(Verity, adoptee aged 14)

Andrea describes how her daughter, Verity, used to want more contact when it was restricted to traditional methods. However, now that virtual contact had allowed for unmediated contact at any time, it was too much for Verity and she wants to return to more formalised practices:

So she used to press for more contact, supervised contact, times and things like that, and she was the real driver for it. And now she says she wants to really pull back a bit, or quite a bit, but she says she got sucked in beyond her depth, and that she does want to see them but kind of only like one visit or something. She doesn’t want them to be in contact with her all the time.

(Andrea, adoptive mother)

Verity was happy to be in contact with her siblings but not her birth mother. This highlights that virtual contact is complex and cannot be simply dichotomised into ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ categories. The young people who took part in this study seemed able to distinguish between birth relatives they wanted to be in contact with and those they did not,

which may add some challenge to Brenda's idea that adopted young people are not emotionally equipped to manage virtual contact. In addition, Verity's elder sister did not react as negatively to the virtual contact by their birth mother. This case highlights the nuanced experiences of virtual contact depending on how it is interpreted by an adoptive family member and also on which birth relatives are involved. As Verity's words highlight some benefits of this contact, despite an initial negative reaction, this paper will now consider what these positive aspects can entail.

### **The Opportunities of virtual contact**

This section explores the opportunities that virtual contact has afforded some adoptive families. The benefits include: the contact answering the adoptee's identity questions and curiosity; the family-like nature of virtual contact; the ability to extend existing relationships with birth relatives; the normality and reality it brings to the child's dual connection; and, the convenience of technology.

Virtual contact was seen by some adoptive parents and adoptees to offer a way to fill in gaps in their identity and to satisfy their curiosity. Steven, a 15 year old adoptee, described how the virtual contact with his birth siblings had reduced the information gap (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009) in his genealogical history by answering questions about his past. He felt that the contact with his siblings was enough to satisfy his curiosity without having to ask his birth parents any questions. Steven's experience highlights the different purposes individual birth relatives can fulfil. For example, Steven has developed a relationship with his siblings that has been extended from previous direct contact with them, however he does not feel ready to talk to his birth parents. Therefore the opportunity to answer identity questions is limited to certain birth relatives:

I think if I wasn't in touch with [siblings], I think there'd be a lot more questions I'd be asking my birth parents. But with them, it sort of explains quite a lot.

(Steven, adoptee aged 15)

The formal nature of arrangements has been highlighted as a limitation of traditional contact methods (Jones & Hackett, 2012). Therefore, one possible advantage of unmediated virtual contact could be that it allows adoptive families to have more control over contact arrangements. This may, of course, also introduce risks for some participants. Nonetheless, for some families it allowed a more natural and everyday development of family contact. Sharon, an adoptive mother, describes this in relation to the fact that Facebook is used in the same way with her family as with her children's birth relatives. Therefore, the virtual contact that had developed with birth relatives was included under the umbrella term of 'family' incorporating both sides of the adoptive and birth families:

So there's nothing different about the way Facebook has grown with the children's side of the family, the in-laws if you like, compared with how it's grown with my side of the family. It's just been very similar in terms of the way we use it. So it's just a way for the family to know what each other is doing.

(Sharon, adoptive mother)

Where traditional methods of contact had worked well, some families had moved on from these methods and extended their relationships with birth relatives in a positive way. This is highlighted in Diane's family where the direct contact with siblings had been extended through technology:

So when he met up with his brother and sister they did exchange [Facebook information]...I think it was some comfort that, you know, rather than just have a meet up twice a year they could speak to each other.

(Diane, adoptive mother)

The lack of formality allowed the connection to feel more natural and family-like and allowed the siblings to develop more personal, ‘family practices of openness’ (Jones & Hackett, 2011).

A practical reason that allows virtual contact to extend openness in the positive ways described above, is the convenience and speed of e-communication. Steven, 15 years old, preferred the use of Facebook to the traditional method of letterbox contact as it reduced the time he had to wait for a response from birth relatives:

It’s easier because it’s quicker and you can, like you don’t have to wait three or four days for a reply, maybe longer depending on what they want to write or something...And you can just, you can send them a message and within about three or four minutes you can get a reply.

(Steven adoptee aged 15)

In addition to speed, the convenience of virtual contact had been felt by Martin, an adoptive father, by reducing the distance between family members. In Martin’s family the siblings of their children are separated by distance making regular contact practically difficult:

Now Facebook is ideal, it’s fantastic for them because they’re all over the place. The adopted sibling groups and my family’s sibling groups are in touch.

(Martin, adoptive father)

Lee describes how the various methods of contact, including virtual contact, have allowed him to maintain a real sense of his dual connection to his birth and adoptive families:

By keeping contact with them in different methods I can know how they are and I’ve grown up knowing I was adopted and also knowing who my birth family was. I just think it’s a normal way because I’ve grown up with it and I’ve got used to having four of my different family members instead of two.



(Lee, adoptee aged 18)

Lee's comments highlight the importance of maintaining contact due to reasons surrounding 'knowing' and information (Jones & Hackett, 2012). He did not distinguish between traditional and technological methods of contact here, suggesting that virtual contact had become part of a wider picture of openness in his family. Therefore, virtual contact could offer an opportunity to usefully extend existing contact with birth relatives.

However, there were complexities evident within Lee's family. Lee's adoptive mother Sharon and his older brother David (aged 22) both highlighted how their current experience of virtual contact (at the time of interview) was a positive addition to their maintenance of relationships with the adoptees' birth grandmother, uncles and cousins. This is the contact that Lee discusses above. However, the potential for the adoptees' birth mother to get in contact via Facebook was one that could cause challenges in the future due to her negative role in the child's pathway to care. Sharon (adoptive mother) describes that if her children's birthmother was to get in touch it would "completely put a spanner in the works". David was a lot less concerned than his adoptive mother and felt able to control the boundaries of the virtual contact he maintains through the use of online privacy settings:

I don't see her [birthmother] in my picture...I did worry about that [his birthmother getting in contact] at first...then you know, she could go on my uncle's profile and find me as a friend, what would it matter? She can't see anything, she can't talk to me, she can't even add me as a friend. You just whack the privacy settings for non-friends.

(David, adoptee aged 22)

A further complexity in Sharon's family arose when both Lee (aged 18) and his sister Nicola (aged 16) expressed an interest in contacting the birth mother in the future with the siblings stating:

I allow second chances. I'd visit my mum and I'd like to get the full explanation and see what's really happened.

(Lee, aged 18)

I would like to talk to my mum but I know I'm not allowed, but I would like to talk to her and ask her 'why?'

(Nicola, aged 16)

Sharon's family highlights that despite their current experience of virtual contact being described as positive by all members of the family, there were sensitivities to consider for the future. There were also differences in opinion amongst the siblings with regards to which birth family members can be allowed into the online family network. This fluidity in relation to the boundaries of virtual contact can mean that it is difficult to pinpoint whether it is a positive or negative addition to openness and there is an uncertain future in relation to how the contact will develop in Sharon's family.

## **Discussion**

This study has explored the way in which virtual contact has been experienced by ten adoptive families. When this research was conducted in 2013 Facebook emerged as the dominant medium through which virtual contact occurred. However, new media have since gained popularity and therefore we recognise the speed at which e-communication changes and develops. Despite the fact that the immediacy and unmediated nature of virtual contact will continue to distinguish it from other forms of traditional contact, the ways in which technology develops in the future may add new challenges.

The interviews carried out with adoptive parents and adoptees highlighted that the Internet brings possibilities with new forms of connectivity, but also introduces a range of challenges. These risks are particularly important to consider in relation to children who are

adopted from the care system due to the complex nature of their pathway to care. In addition, there appears to be a tension between maintaining the safety of adopted young people and allowing for the progression of more natural contact via technology. It became clear that the same aspects of virtual contact that create benefits for one family can create risks for another. This can be related to the use of communicative technologies by children and young people in general, as the act of making a Facebook ‘friend’, for example, can be positive or negative (Livingstone, 2013). In relation to virtual contact, the unmediated nature of this form of communication can have beneficial outcomes for some in the form of more family-like and regular connections, extending the ‘family practices of openness’ beyond professionally defined contact (Jones & Hackett, 2011). However, for another family this aspect of virtual contact can lead to unwelcome intrusions in family life and inappropriate conduct of birth relatives. Out of the ten cases presented, only two cases were coded as positive and two with mixed positive and negative elements. Therefore, even when virtual contact presents opportunities for adoptive families, potential risks must be considered. This complex interplay of challenge and reward points to the sensitive nature of this form of contact.

The availability of communicative technologies, including social networking sites, has created new tasks of openness for adoptive families. The maintenance of a child’s dual connection to their adoptive and birth families is a ‘complex dance’ (Grotevant, Perry & McRoy, 2005: 182) that must be renegotiated through the child’s life. Virtual contact is an additional dance step that must be learnt and negotiated to ensure adopted young people are carefully choreographed to manage potential reunions with birth relatives before they reach adulthood. As noted, the positive experience of virtual contact is also often a challenging one. As highlighted by Sharon and her adopted children, even when virtual contact is working well there are still sensitivities to consider due to the potential for virtual contact to change and develop. Sharon was particularly concerned about the possibility of contact with her

children's birth mother which would have had a negative impact on the existing beneficial nature of virtual contact in this adoptive family. Therefore, this insecurity is possibly related to the feeling of not being in control of the evolution of post-adoption contact via communicative technologies. This notion of 'constrained parenthood' (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013) can create difficulties in adoptive parent abilities to effectively support their adopted child when facing the risks of virtual contact. In cases where there were differences in parent-child opinions, the parent seemed to think more negatively about the impact of virtual contact. This could be due to a sense of threat and lack of control. The belief that contact can threaten parental authority and parent-child relationships has been highlighted (Sykes, 2000). In addition, the positivity of adoptive parents towards contact has been found to be influenced by feeling in control of the contact arrangements (Smith & Logan, 2004; Triseliotis, Feast & Kyle, 2005). Therefore a sense of powerlessness over contact arrangements and a sense of constrained parenthood (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013), could increase the sense of threat and unease of adoptive parents in relation to virtual contact. However, based on this small sample, this does seem to be dependent on the birth relative involved and adoptive parents were more wary of birth parent involvement. Sharon's family highlights the potentially fragile nature of virtual contact and therefore the need for careful ongoing review to assess the suitability of this contact for each family. In addition, there is a need to consider the complex relationships within the family related to individual needs and boundaries. Developing effective management strategies can ensure beneficial virtual contact continues to be positive and that which is challenging does not cause further harm.

### **Suggestions for Practice**

This paper has exemplified that virtual contact does present new challenges for adoptive families. However, it is also evident that communicative technologies can provide a suitable and beneficial alternative contact method when particular boundaries can be put in

place. In particular, virtual contact can present opportunities to extend existing contact that is established and going well. When benefits were present, they were often restricted to certain chosen relationships. For example, some young people expressed their desire to continue virtual contact with siblings but not with the birth parents. Social work support that can help young people identify important and safe relationships would be useful to create boundaries around the virtual contact experience. In addition, adoptive parents may require support to ensure that they do not feel powerless or threatened by virtual contact. When this balance is struck, perhaps the opportunities of virtual contact may begin to outweigh the challenges. As Neil, Beek and Ward (2013) argue it is important that the debate surrounding the use of communicative technologies in adoptive families should not be dominated by risk. We would agree and argue that social work practice must take a balanced approach and consider whether virtual contact could be a positive addition to the maintenance of an adopted young person's dual connection in certain instances. More research is needed to identify the characteristics of families, relationships and circumstances that lead to positive outcomes of virtual contact for children.

When considering the suitability of virtual contact a balance must be struck between the safety of the child and whether it is appropriate for technology to extend connectivity in a more natural way. Also this needs to be assessed in relation to each relative rather than a birth family or adoptive family as a whole and cannot be a one-off decision but will change over the lifecourse. The debate surrounding the risks and benefits of more traditional methods of post-adoption contact is still ongoing (Triseliotis, 2010) and the use of technology as a contact method must be included in this debate to ensure empirical evidence is collated on the impact of this development on adoptive and birth families. The lessons already learned through wider research about openness and contact in adoption to date point to the need to consider a variety of individual, family and structural factors when planning and sustaining

contact for each adopted child to decide whether contact is suitable and in which form (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). The emergence of virtual contact is another factor to consider in the maintenance of a child's dual connection.

### **Conclusion**

This study reports on the views of 11 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people. The small number of participants and the absence of birth relative views mean that it is not possible to confidently generalise findings to wider adoptive families. A note of caution should be raised here regarding the relevance of the study to e-communication more generally given the speed with which communicative technologies develop and change. It should also be noted that two of the adoptees interviewed were 18 years and above. Therefore, their accounts contain different underlying meanings due to the legal position of adult adoptees being able to access their birth records. A potential limitation related to the sampling strategy should be raised as the participants who were recruited via the adoption agency were known to practitioners due to them reporting the virtual contact in their family and asking for support. Therefore their accounts may not be representative of wider families and may represent a more negative picture of virtual contact. Therefore, there may be more positive stories that are not represented in the study.

However, the findings do provide some insight into the ways communicative technologies are impacting the practice of post-adoption contact. The findings point to the existence of nuanced experiences of virtual contact that are mediated by individual adoptee needs and also the birth relatives that are involved. There is a complex interplay of risk and opportunity associated with the use of e-communication methods and the fluid and changeable nature of this form of contact make it difficult to state whether it is a positive or negative addition to the maintenance of openness for an individual child. However, with controlled boundaries and regular review, virtual contact can provide an alternative method

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of connection that can help adoptees to decide how and who to remain in contact with post-adoption.

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