

## Dr Elsbeth Neil

### *Supporting direct contact after adoption*

Beth Neil is a Senior Lecturer in social work in the School of Social Work and Psychology at the University of East Anglia. After her undergraduate degree in Psychology, Beth worked for several years in social care, then went to UEA in 1992 to study for her master's degree in social work. After two years in child care practice, she returned to UEA in 1996 to undertake her PhD on the topic of contact after adoption. Since then, Beth has continued to research in this field, exploring the perspectives of adoptive parents, adopted children and birth relatives, using both qualitative and quantitative methodology.

Beth was speaking to Mary Beek, Professional Adviser to DfE's Adoption Policy Team about the 'Supporting contact after adoption' study. This was an in depth study of services supporting direct contact between adopted children and their birth relatives, along with the costs and outcomes of these services.

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Mary: Beth, what would you say was the most rewarding part of this research project for you?

**Beth: Well, I suppose one thing I found particularly interesting in this study is we looked at sibling contact arrangements, whereas my previous contact research had focused on adult birth relatives, parents and grandparents, so it was really nice to see some of the dynamics of the sibling contact arrangements. We did interviews with grown up siblings of adopted children too, so that was just a whole new way of looking at contact for me, so I found that really interesting and fascinating.**

Mary: What do you think was the most difficult thing?

**Beth: Probably the biggest challenge was just trying to keep the child at the centre of what we were doing. We collected a lot of data about children and young people but we didn't collect data from children and young people themselves. So we had to work particularly hard to keep the young person's perspective at our forefront in the study, because we were relying very much on adoptive parents' accounts of their children.**

Mary: If you had to choose just one key message, what would it be?

**Beth: I think I'd say that you do have to take everybody's needs and feelings into account in contact. Yes, it is for the child and the child is the most important person, but if you don't think about what's going on for the birth parent, what's going on for the adoptive parent, you won't get it right for the child. So you've got to have everybody's perspective in there and you've got to make some tricky balances between these different perspectives.**

Mary: And are there messages particularly for the family justice system would you say?

**Beth: Well, yes. We were following up these contact arrangements after several years – but some of the difficulties sometimes and the problems went right back to the planning stage and I think this is where courts are involved. I think it's important (at that stage) to ask people to evidence what they're doing with the contact plan, to ask why people want to do things the way they want to do things.**

**But one of our key messages is that contact is very dynamic and it can change, in most cases it will change. It needs to change because children grow up and want different things and families change. So at the planning stage, when the case is in court, you can't be too definite really. You have to allow for these dynamics to unfold and you have to allow for some review later on. So just try and think flexibly.**

Mary: And what about the children and families social workers? What would the main message for them be?

**Beth:** I think that, again, you have to think long term about the contact but you also have to take into account what's going on right now. So you have to recognise when you're making a contact plan that you're seeing the birth parent at the point in time where they will be least accepting of the adoption. but – you know, a lot of parents can change. You're not going to see the best of them at that point in time, so you have to allow for that in your planning.

You're also maybe not going to see the best of adoptive parents at the time before they have a child placed with them. I think it's very normal and natural that adoptive parents are quite anxious about birth family contact, they worry that it will get in the way of their relationship with this child. So again, I think, as the child's social worker, you have to bear in mind how things might unfold in the future and, again, you have to have quite a flexible plan in mind and it might be that some of the finer details of the contact planning need to be done after the adoption or certainly reviewed after the adoption when the dust has settled a little bit. So I think just don't be too definite and firm about what can and can't happen.

**Mary:** So is that where the adoption services would come in? Are there messages for adoption services would you say from that?

**Beth:** Well, I guess adoption services could help social workers think through what the longer term perspective might be. But then, in most cases, they're the people implementing the contact plan after adoption. So again I think our main messages for adoption social workers are about trying to balance everybody's needs. And also one thing I'd really like to say about the contact is try and think of it positively. Try and think about how you can make it a pleasant event, how you can make it a happy memory, how you can make it a nice experience. We've all got stuff we can draw on in our own lifespan, you know, if we organise a social event, we've got lots of experience. How do we make people feel comfortable, how do we help our guests get on with each other, how do we cater for the children who are going to be there? I think sometimes we treat contact meetings so clinically, we're thinking all the time of the risks and we're trying to control the risks and, at the end of the meeting, nobody's had a nice time, nobody's felt comfortable.

**Mary:** And are there messages for commissioners, would you say?

**Beth:** Well, we looked at the cost of supporting contact and it does cost money to get it right for some children, so we have to anticipate that. But not everybody needs the same contact support plan. We don't have to supervise every contact arrangement, for example. Some cases will need that, some cases won't, some cases will need the contact to be supervised or supported during the meeting for a while and then they can move to meeting by themselves.

- Mary: And are there messages for adoptive parents would you say from the findings?
- Beth: Yes. I think I'd encourage adoptive parents to have their own sense of control over these arrangements, you know, once that child is adopted, that's your child. Don't feel too much that the social worker always knows best. If you have an idea about how you think contact could be done differently, what might make it feel more comfortable, don't be afraid to say that, don't always think that the professionals are the experts.**
- Mary: And do you think there's room for further research in the field? What would you suggest?
- Beth: What I would like to do actually is to hear from adopted young people themselves what their experiences of supervised contact because we heard a lot about that from the birth parents and the adoptive parents. What is it like to have that social worker in the meeting? It'd be interesting to hear from adopted teenagers what do they think of having that person at their contact meeting. I think that would be a nice study.**
- Mary: OK. Thank you very much, Beth.