



## Open adoption of children in NSW out-of-home care

### General public perceptions and motivation



Takahiro Aoyagi, 2008, Untitled - Sydney College of the Arts

#### Institute of Open Adoption Studies

In 2017 the Institute of Open Adoption Studies conducted an internet-based survey, with 1,000 residents in NSW. The survey explored perceptions, motivations, and barriers to adopting children from out-of-home care (OOHC), particularly from foster care.

The NSW Government has been leading a major shift in policy and legislation to decrease the number of children who remain in long-term foster care, and prioritising kinship care, guardianship, or open adoption when restoration is not realistically possible. The survey offered the opportunity to assess whether these changes have resulted in a growing awareness and understanding of children who can be adopted from out-of-home care, and a motivation to adopt these children.

#### Key Findings

- The majority of respondents revealed good awareness of foster care and an understanding that children can be adopted from foster care (between 80-90% of respondents).
- There was a lack of understanding about open adoption as practiced in NSW. Few respondents were aware of what open adoption is, what is involved in the application process, and the availability of financial and non-financial post-adoption support.
- More than half of the respondents had never thought about adoption (60% of respondents) and half (50%) thought it was unlikely that they would consider adopting a child now or in the future.

- There was a view that more people would be encouraged to adopt a child if the application process was simpler and there was better information about the adoption process.
- Nearly a third of respondents would be encouraged to adopt a child from foster care if there was financial support to meet the child's need; less than a third would be encouraged to adopt if there were support services available for adoptive parents.
- Among the concerns expressed by respondents was the misconception that they would have to meet the legal cost for an adoption.
- Almost a quarter of respondents were worried that birth parents could get their child or children back in an open adoption.

#### How was the survey conducted?

The survey questions included: awareness of open adoption and foster care, motivation to adopt, perceived benefits of adopting children from foster care, identifying suitable adoptive parents, knowledge of adoption support and training, and perceptions and attitudes towards birth families. Additional questions asked respondents to rate their level of social support and life satisfaction, and requested demographic information (e.g., gender, marital status, education level).

Respondents were recruited via a research panel firm, to target a representative sample of 1000 participants in NSW (50% male, 50% female) and age groups (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55+).



# Key Findings and Attitudes

## General public perceptions and motivation

### Do people know what foster care and open adoption are?

- 30 respondents (3%) currently have at least one child in their care from out-of-home care
- 61 respondents (6%) had been adopted as a child
- About a third of respondents (33%) have a sibling, relative or friend who had been adopted as a child.
- 93% of respondents had very good or some understanding of what foster care is
- 83% of respondents were aware that children can be adopted from foster care
- However, when asked whether they knew what *open adoption* was, 54% of respondents indicated “no”.

### Are people motivated to adopt a child?

- 60% of respondents indicated that they had never thought about adopting a child
- 25% of respondents were either very likely or somewhat likely to consider adopting a child now or in the future, whereas 35% of respondents were very unlikely.

### What would encourage people to consider adopting from foster care?

- About a third of participants (33%) noted that the availability of financial support to meet the child’s needs would encourage them to consider adopting a child from foster care.
- Almost a third of participants (29%) noted that the availability of support services for adoptive parents would also encourage them to consider adopting a child from foster care.
- Respondents also indicated that they would be encouraged to adopt a child from foster care if the application process was simpler (30%) and if there was better information available about the application process (25%).
- However, for 31% of respondents, nothing would encourage them to adopt a child from foster care.

### What makes a suitable adoptive parent?

Respondents indicated what they would find to be favourable and unfavourable characteristics of adoptive parents, as shown below. Consensus was reached on a number of these characteristics, but there were mixed opinions on a range of others. Respondents also expected that adoptive parents should be ‘good people’ and have good parenting skills, and that gay people and same-sex couples should be allowed to adopt.



#### Favourable for an adoptive parent

- sufficient space at home
- experience caring for children with special needs
- experience as a carer
- in good health
- employed
- financially secure



#### Unfavourable for an adoptive parent

- smoker
- has criminal conviction



#### Mixed opinions

- has been a foster carer or had adopted before
- volunteer experience
- has biological children
- limited experience with children
- completed high school
- owns their own home
- married, single, or in a same-sex partnership
- under 30 or over 50 years of age



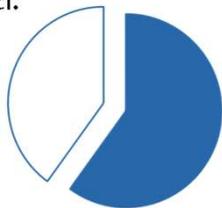
# Beliefs versus Facts

## General public perceptions and motivation

### What is 'open adoption'?

More than half of the respondents indicated that they did not know what *open adoption* is or were unable to provide a definition of open adoption. Other definitions provided by respondents varied:

- Incorrect or not enough information (8%): "like foster care, not permanent", "good"
- Provided a general definition for adoption (9%): "looking after someone's child who is not your own biologically", "taking a child in to your family, permanently"
- Believed that *open* refers to the expanding of criteria to allow a broader range of people to apply for adoption or that any child could be adopted (4%): "being allowed to adopt any child without restriction", "anyone can adopt"
- Only 20% of respondents were aware that there is an exchange of information between adoptive and birth families, and/or the opportunities for contact.



About 58% of respondents were unable to define what open adoption is



There is a lack of awareness that open adoptions from OOHHC in NSW often involves regular communications and face-to-face contact with birth family

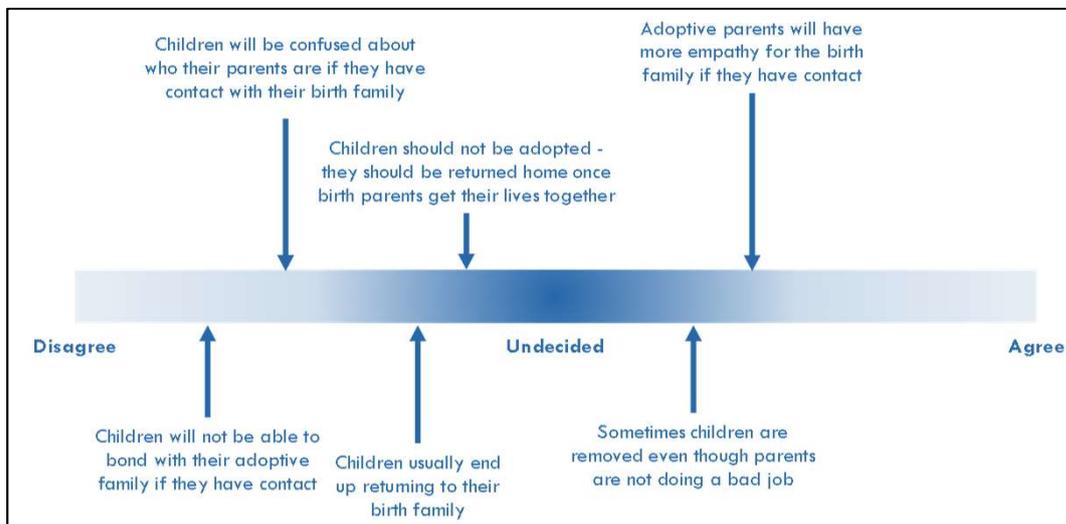
Respondents understood (between 60-75% agreed) that open adoptions allow children to know who their birth parents are, allow access to their family history, and that contact may occur through indirect channels (e.g., letters, Facebook) and also includes contact with siblings and/or grandparents.

### Facts about contact

- In open adoptions, birth and adoptive families have access to each other's personal information, to varying degrees, and there is an expectation of contact when it is in the child's best interests.
- Open adoption is specified in the NSW legislation and seeks to sustain positive communication between the adopted child or young person, adoptive parents and birth parents, when it is in the best interests of the child.
- In NSW, face-to-face contact is often occurring between the child, carers, birth parents, extended family members, before an adoption.
- Plans for post-adoption contact are mutually agreed to by all involved and written directly into an 'Adoption Plan'.

### Perceptions of birth families

Respondents' views of birth families and contact was also mixed, as indicated in the schematic below.



A schematic of statements in which respondents had mixed opinions (similar rates of agree-to-undecided and disagree-to-undecided)

## Factors that would encourage adoption

The findings of this study strongly suggest that the general public lacks knowledge about the application process, and the availability of financial and non-financial post-adoption support.

Many people thought they would be encouraged to adopt a child if the application procedure was simpler and there was better information about the adoption process. In addition, nearly a third of respondents would be encouraged to adopt a child from foster care if there was financial support to meet the child's needs and support services for adoptive parents.

Approximately half of respondents were not sure whether adoptive parents were responsible for legal costs for the adoption and nearly a quarter of respondents were concerned that birth parents could get their child or children back in an open adoption.

## Facts about adoption in NSW

- Children typically enter and remain in OOHC because it is not safe for them to remain in the care of their parents, and their parents do not appear capable or willing to provide a safe environment for their child nor improve their parenting capacity. Open adoption becomes an option when there is no realistic possibility of restoring the child to his or her parents, and when a guardianship with a relative, kin or other suitable person is not possible.
- Only the highest court in NSW, the Supreme Court, has jurisdiction to determine and make Adoption Orders under the *Adoption Act 2000 (NSW)*. An Adoption Order permanently severs the legal relationship a child has with his or her birth family. A new birth certificate is issued for the child, which records the name(s) of the adoptive parent(s) as the legal parent(s) and the child's new name (if applicable).
- All proposed adoptive parents are required to undergo assessment to be approved to adopt. This is an extensive assessment which takes into account a broad range of factors (e.g., age, health, financial circumstances, parenting

capacity, relationships, ability to support development of the child's identity and facilitate contact and/or communication with birth family).

- Training seminars are available for prospective adoptive parents which cover many topics (e.g., benefits of open adoption, the legal process, adoption plans and contact).
- When a child is adopted from foster care in NSW, the Department of Family and Community Services makes the adoption application to the Supreme Court and covers the legal costs.
- From 1 July 2017, the NSW government introduced an adoption allowance for out-of-home care adoptions. The allowance is means-tested (i.e., paid to adoptive parents who are eligible to receive all or part of Family Tax Benefit Part A).



Robyn Armstrong, 2009, Red sky in morning who's taking warning, Sydney dust storm. Sydney College of the Arts

## Next Steps

The Institute intends to use the findings from this study to inform future research, and to address some of the current gaps in evidence and understanding. For example, a qualitative survey is underway to explore contact from the perspectives of children, birth parents and permanent families.

Another planned study will employ a partnership approach to conduct action research with government and non-government agencies to trial practices that promote positive relationships between children, their birth and permanent families (in guardianship, kinship care, open adoption or long-term foster care). The results from both of these studies will be used to identify resources and casework practices that enable families to build constructive and respectful relationships.

March 2018

For more information

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