



## Reverse visitation between former foster parents and adopted children

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### ABSTRACT

A crucial aspect of designing transitions from foster care to adoptive homes is whether to facilitate contact between the child and their former caregivers after the transition, a practice known as reverse visitation. There is almost no research available on the use of this practice and its correlates, despite it being widely recommended based on attachment theory. In this exploratory study, surveys were completed by adoptive parents, foster parents, or caseworkers on 205 children moving from a foster home to a separate adoptive home in a convenience sample in the State of Oregon. Children were in some form of contact with their former foster parents in 70% of the adoptions. They had in-person visits with their prior caregivers 49% of the time. Associations between these forms of posttransition contact and other variables highlighted characteristics of the foster and adoptive parents as influential. Implications for child welfare practice and research are discussed.

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When children are adopted out of the child welfare system, a crucial question is whether those children are to have any contact with their former foster parents, a concept referred to in this paper as “reverse visitation.” Almost half (48%) of all children adopted out of the child welfare system in the United States go to an adoptive home other than their foster home (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2020); this amounts to over 30,000 children leaving their foster home for a new adoptive home in 2019. An underexamined aspect of the adoptive transition process has been contact between the child and/or adoptive parents with the former foster parent(s), especially in the United States. Even relatively recent resources for adoptive families may not address contact with former foster parents (e.g., Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Reviewing the various state adoption policy manuals (accessed at the Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021) found that three states’ manuals (Mississippi, Utah, Tennessee) do mention posttransition contact between former foster parents and the adoptive parents or child, although the vast majority do not.

Gaining further understanding of the adoptive process and reverse visitation is important as poorly managed transitions have the capacity to negatively impact the child (Burnell, Castell, & Cousins, 2009; Davis, 2015; Neil, Young, & Hartley, 2018; Swain, 2016), the adoptive parents (Neil et al., 2018; Selwyn, Meakings, & Wijedasa, 2015) and the foster parent (Davis, 2015; Hebert, Kulkin, & McLean, 2013; Hopkins-Best, 2012; Lynes & Sitcoe, 2019; Neil et al., 2018; Swain, 2016).

## Literature review

Clinical recommendations supporting reverse visitation started with Fahlberg's (1991) classic work and have continued through the years (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014; Browning, 2015; Burnell et al., 2009; Care Inquiry, 2013; Hopkins-Best, 2012; Lewis, 2018; Neil, 2018), including in the legal system (Webster, 2001).

The rationale for reverse visits, based on attachment theory, is that visits with former caregivers will reduce anxiety for all involved (Neil, Beek, & Schofield, 2020). Bowlby (1973) theorized that children will experience and show increased fear when separated from their attachment figures because, in the evolutionary environment, that separation placed the child at heightened risk of death from predators without the protection of adults. This separation anxiety would include children moved from foster parents because children become attached to foster parents (e.g. Chase & Dozier, 2004). These clinical recommendations have emphasized that reverse visits give the adopted child a sense that relationships do not suddenly end and those people disappear, never to be seen from again. Rather, the child might learn that former foster parents will continue to care about them and think of them even after not seeing them regularly.

Birth parents experience their own anxiety about the safety of their children when separated from them (e.g., George & Solomon, 1999) and foster parents also report this anxiety about children that have been adopted out of their home (Hebert et al., 2013). Reverse visits are seen as helping foster parents mourn the loss of the child they hopefully have formed an attachment to and thereby be more emotionally ready to foster more children and not drop out of foster parenting.

Adoptive parents have reported that contact with former foster parents helped the children stay connected to an important person in their life, minimized their sense of loss, provided them a sense that relationships and their lives have continuity as well as having provided adoptive parents with a source of parenting support (Neil et al., 2018). When current and former foster children (N = 179) were surveyed, more than 80% of them thought it's important to be in contact with former foster parents – they reported reasons including preexisting attachments and continuity of life stories (Swain, 2016).

Yet reverse visitation is not universal and there is often resistance reported among the participants in the adoptive process. Hesitation comes from individual caseworkers, foster parents, and adoptive parents who worry about the child's reaction to seeing their former caregivers again, as exemplified in Boswell and Cudmore (2014):

Among the adults, including social workers, there was a widely held belief that it was better, as one adoptive parent put it, to "let sleeping dogs lie". The aim seemed to be to help the child to "forget" as quickly as possible, hoping that "out of sight" might mean "out of mind" (p. 14).

Sinclair, Baker, Wilson, and Gibbs (2005) interviewed adoptive parents about why contact with foster parents had not occurred and noted a variety of reasons: potentially disruptive to the child to reinitiate contact with the prior caregiver, the child being judged too young, concerns about the prior caregiver, the prior caregiver being too far away, the child not seeming to want contact, or reluctant foster parents. Foster parents (N = 383) in Swain's (2016) survey identified resistance from adoptive parents and/or caseworkers as the most common reasons foster parents might not stay in touch with former foster children. If the foster parent is perceived as in some way interfering with the attachment process for the adoptive family and child, then avoiding or stopping visits is often recommended (Fahlberg, 1991; Sinclair et al., 2005).

How often does reverse visitation occur after adoptive placement is the most basic question. Half of children did not see their prior foster caregivers after adoption in the Sinclair et al. (2005) report, 38% saw them once or twice per year, 4% at a monthly rate and 8% saw their prior caregivers more often than monthly (N = 69). A survey of 226 adoptive parents found that 75% of the children had had some form of contact with their former foster parents (Neil et al., 2018).

Neil et al. (2018) asked adoptive parents (n = 226) who influenced the plan for reverse visitations and reported that 57.5% of the adoptive parents identified themselves, 42% noted the foster parents, 23.5% named the child and 16.1% mentioned the child welfare agency. In the same study, adoptive parents whose children had had reverse visitation (n = 174) rated the impact of the reverse visitation on the child. These visits were seen as very positive 56% of the time, slightly positive 17% of the time, 19% neutral, 4% slightly negative, and 3% very negative (Neil et al., 2018).

The vast majority of these papers in the literature review are from the United Kingdom; with none of the empirical studies from the United States. Thus, this exploratory study is needed to provide more data about the occurrence of reverse visitation between foster parents and adopted children, especially as occurring in the United States, and to look at correlates of that contact for the first time.

## **Study goals**

The purposes of the current study, which is part of a larger study, are to:

- (1) Describe the occurrence, type and other characteristics of contact between former foster parents and adopted children in a United States convenience sample.
- (2) Report relationships between the occurrence or not of reverse visitation and other variables related to the child, foster parent, adoptive parent, or adoptive transition process.

## **Methods**

Subjects were recruited from trainings presented to the child welfare community in the state of Oregon in the United States and through the outreach of the Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center (ORPARC) and thus were a convenience sample and may not be representative of adoptive parents, foster parents, or child welfare caseworkers. All three groups were present in the community trainings while the outreach through ORPARC mostly resulted in surveys from foster and adoptive parents. Thus, each participant responded about one child's transition and each transition had only one respondent describing it. Using demographic data, it was confirmed that no child had more than one survey completed about him or her. Because the link for the survey was available on the ORPARC website, it was not possible to estimate a response rate.

Respondents were instructed to answer about the most recent child whose transition to an adoptive home they were part of. If more than one child was involved in that transition, they were directed to answer about the youngest child. Only transitions that entailed a child moving from a foster home to a separate, different adoptive home were included. All transitions occurred in Oregon and included children in the state child welfare system. All questions used in this study were either yes/no or multiple choice. Transition was defined as "the time between the first in-person contact between the child and the future adoptive parent and when the child is living permanently with the future adoptive parent." Study procedures were approved by the relevant Institutional Review Boards and consent was obtained from all study participants.

All surveys were about the most recent adoptive transition that the respondent was involved in. Thus, this was a retrospective study with transitions occurring between one month and thirty years prior to the survey being completed. Because foster parents and caseworkers were involved in more transitions than adoptive parents, they were more likely to be responding about a more recent transition. The retrospective nature of the data has

many issues with it that will be discussed later. However, the decision was made to include all surveys to add greater statistical power and also to provide insight into the way adoptive transitions may have changed over time through correlational analyses with how long ago the adoption had been completed.

The survey was designed to include characteristics of the child, the adoptive home, the foster home, the caseworker, and the transition process. Some items were only answered by some respondents based on their available knowledge; e.g., caseworkers were not asked about the child's behavior during visits but foster and adoptive parents were. Items were also included that asked the respondent to evaluate the adoptive transition on the appropriateness of the transition's length, whether the transition could have been improved or not, how well the transition help the child form a relationship with the adoptive parents and how well the transition helped the child shift the relationship with the foster parent. Potential items were generated from the literature review and clinical experience. An early version of the questionnaire was previewed by members of the local Special Needs Adoption Coalition and input was given and integrated into subsequent revisions. A full listing of all questions in the survey is in [Tables 1–4](#). Respondents used their own understandings of the terms used in the survey rather than definitions being provided.

As part of the survey, there were questions asking about contact between foster parents and adopted children after the transition and between foster parents and adoptive parents after the transitions. There were also follow-up questions about the nature and timing of the contact between the children and their former foster parents; e.g., where the first in-person contact occurred, how long after the transition was completed did the first reverse visitation occur, what kind(s) of contact occurred (in-person, phone calls, some form of written contact).

Analyses were conducted using the SPSS statistical package. After reporting percentage use of reverse visitation, exploratory analyses will be conducted to look at what variables are associated with reverse visitation employing t-test and chi-square analyses.

## Results

**Sample demographics.** Surveys were completed for 205 children (identified as 54% female and 46% male) with a separate respondent for each transition; 94 by adoptive parents, 64 by foster parents and 47 by state child welfare case-workers. The surveys were completed on average 36.5 months after the transition. The relationship between the child and the adoptive parent was as nonrelated strangers in 65% of the families, nonrelated but had preexisting relationship in 16% of the families, and kinship placement for 19% of the families. It is important to remember that we did not include adoptions where the child's existing foster families adopted the child. Due to an unfortunate

**Table 1.** Interval-level descriptive characteristics of participants and transition process in adoptive transitions.

Descriptive Characteristic	N	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Range
How long had child been in foster home at time of transition (in months)	202	16.9	14.0	13.5	0–96
Child's age at removal from birth home (in months)	187	25.8	14.0	29.9	1–132
Child's age at transition (in months)	204	56.7	46.5	41.5	3–204
Number of prior foster placements	197	2.4	2.0	2.7	0–17
Foster parent's age at time of adoptive transition (in years)	61	45.2	39.0	12.0	28–75
Number of children in foster home at transition (not including target child)	201	2.2	2.0	2.3	0–15
Length of time foster parent had been fostering at transition (in years)	174	5.5	3.0	6.4	0–40
Adoptive parents age at time of adoptive transition	93	38	38	7.3	23–60
How many children in adoptive home before child joined (50% had none)	203	1.2	0	1.7	0–9
Years as caseworker**	47	11.2	10	7.5	1–30
How long ago did the transition occur (in months)	175	36.5	17	51.1	1–360
Length of transition (in days)	202	27.2	10.5	66.0	1–450
Distance between foster and adoptive homes (in miles)	200	364.0	60	929.8	1–10,000
Number of in-person contacts between foster and adoptive parents during transition*	148	5.3	3.0	10.2	0–100
Number of phone calls between foster and adoptive parents during transition*	147	9.0	2.0	43.7	0–520
Number of e-mails between foster and adoptive parents during transition*	147	3.7	0.0	11.1	0–100
Number of in-person visits between foster and adoptive parents as part of transition process	197	4.4	4.0	3.9	0–25
Cumulative length in hours of visits between adoptive parent and child	143	35.4	15.0	58.0	0–400
Number of phone calls between child and adoptive parents during the transition process*	132	1.9	0.0	4.2	0–27
Number of individuals involved in planning transition	184	3.2	3	1.5	1–7
How much notice (in days) was child given of upcoming transition*	107	12.4	5	34.1	0–270
How soon (in days) first contact occurred between child and former foster parent(s)*	119	32.5	10.0	65.7	1–400

\*Questions asked of adoptive and foster parents only

\*\* Questions asked of caseworkers only

**Table 2.** Nominal-level descriptive characteristics of participants and transition process in adoptive transitions.

Descriptive Characteristic	Nominal variables	N
Gender of child	Female 54% Male 46%	201
Services child receiving at time of transition	EI/Special education 36% Mental health 45% Medical monitoring 17% None 33%	199
Abuse, neglect and other risk factors	Physically Abused 29% Sexually Abused 17% Neglected 76% Exposed to A&D in utero 66% Exposed to DV 55% Lived with substance-abusing parents 69%	202
Was child still in contact with birth parent at time of transition	Yes 28% No 72%	180
Was foster parent considered as an adoptive resource	Yes 34% No 66%	180
Had adoptive parents adopted a child before	Yes 22% No 78%	161
Did any adoptive parent taking a parental leave during transition	Yes 67% No 33%	193
Work status of adoptive parents at time of transition	Both parents fulltime 51% At least one parent only part-time work 20%	
Preexisting relationship of adoptive parent to child (if any)	One or more parents not working outside home 29% Nonrelated strangers 65% Nonrelated but had preexisting relationship 16% Kinship placement 19%	187
Number of adoptive transitions caseworker had been involved in**	Less than five 22% Five to 10 13% 10 to 20 24% More than 20 41%	46
Were older siblings also involved in transitioning	Yes 29% No 71%	204
Birth siblings of target child in same foster home but not transitioning	Yes 18% No 82%	198
Who was involved in planning transition	Child's caseworker 86% Adoptive parent 66% Foster parent 65% Adoptive caseworker 43% Child's psychotherapist 21% Court Appointed Special Advocate 20% Child's lawyer 19%	186
Did a Lifebook accompany child	Yes 56% No 44%	197

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued).

Descriptive Characteristic	Nominal variables	N
Information shared with adoptive parent by foster parent*	Child's daily routine 82% Child's likes and dislikes 89% Effective parenting strategies with child 62% Child's personality and temperament 85% Child's behavior 75% Child's history 55% Birth family history 42%	130
Amount of emotional support shared between foster and adoptive parents	Less than 10 minutes 43% 10–30 minutes 18% 30–60 minutes 14% 60–120 minutes 7% More than 120 minutes 17%	148
Did in-person visits between adoptive parents and child occur Which visit was child alone with adoptive parent without foster parent	Yes 90% No 10% First visit 35% Second visit 32% Third visit 21% Fourth visit 8% Fifth visit or later 4%	205 188
Which visit between child and adoptive parent is first overnight visit	First visit 20% Second visit 19% Third visit 19% Fourth visit 16% Fifth visit 10% Sixth visit 7% Seventh visit or later 10%	177
Did child have contact with adoptive parent before meeting in-person* How was child prepared for upcoming transition*	Yes 31% No 69% Read to 27% Foster parent talk 72% Caseworker talk 61% Child's therapist talk 39%	140 96–99

(Continued)



**Table 2.** (Continued).

Descriptive Characteristic	Nominal variables	N
Child's behavior during visits noted by adoptive or foster parents*	Anxiety 42% Hyperactivity 38% Overfriendliness 34% Clinging 34% Aggression 15% Spaciness 14% None 20%	143
Kind of contact between child and former foster parent after transition	None of any kind 30% In-person 49% Phone calls 48% Written (letters, texts, e-mails, social media) 34%	203
Kind of contact between adoptive parent and foster parent after transition	None of any kind 25% In-person 23% Phone calls 57% Written (letters, texts, e-mails, social media) 57%	201



**Table 3.** Percentile differences between groups with versus without posttransition contact of any sort or in-person visits on nominal variables.

Variable	Percentages with any contact <sup>a</sup>	Statistical test and significance	Percentages with in-person visits	Statistical test and significance
Adoptive parent took parental leave for the transition	Yes 81% No 57%	$\chi^2 = 10.77^{***}$	Yes 55% No 44%	$\chi^2 = 1.54$
Child's caseworker involved in designing transition plan	Yes 70% No 70%	$\chi^2 = 0.003$	Yes 46% No 67%	$\chi^2 = 3.88^*$
Adoptive caseworker involved in designing transition plan	Yes 76% No 66%	$\chi^2 = 2.10$	Yes 50% No 49%	$\chi^2 = 0.04$
Foster parent involved in designing transition plan	Yes 82% No 47%	$\chi^2 = 24.92^{***}$	Yes 57% No 34%	$\chi^2 = 8.63^{**}$
Adoptive parent involved in designing transition plan	Yes 77% No 56%	$\chi^2 = 9.46^{**}$	Yes 50% No 48%	$\chi^2 = 0.09$
Child's therapist involved in designing transition plan	Yes 79% No 67%	$\chi^2 = 2.15$	Yes 46% No 50%	$\chi^2 = 0.18$
Child's lawyer involved in designing transition plan	Yes 71% No 70%	$\chi^2 = 0.05$	Yes 57% No 47%	$\chi^2 = 1.10$
Court-Appointed Special Advocate involved in designing transition plan	Yes 76% No 68%	$\chi^2 = 0.72$	Yes 51% No 49%	$\chi^2 = 0.09$
Did in-person visits occur with adoptive parents as part of transition	Yes 72% No 47%	$\chi^2 = 5.09^*$	Yes 51% No 26%	$\chi^2 = 4.32^*$
Child read to as part of adoptive preparation	Yes 88% No 68%	$\chi^2 = 3.89^*$	Yes 64% No 46%	$\chi^2 = 2.46$
Caseworker talked to child as part of adoptive preparation	Yes 80% No 62%	$\chi^2 = 4.06^*$	Yes 51% No 49%	$\chi^2 = 0.04$
Judgment of transition length by respondent	Too short 61% Just right 85% Too long 47%	$\chi^2 = 29.25^{***}$	Too short 35% Just right 60% Too long 33%	$\chi^2 = 13.70^{***}$
Judgment of whether transition could have been improved	Yes 62% No 86%	$\chi^2 = 12.40^{***}$	Yes 39% No 68%	$\chi^2 = 14.43^{***}$
Clingy behavior by child during transition visits	Yes 71% No 70%	$\chi^2 = 0.05$	Yes 52% No 51%	$\chi^2 = 0.01$
Aggressive behavior by child during transition visits	Yes 48% No 74%	$\chi^2 = 6.15^{**}$	Yes 38% No 53%	$\chi^2 = 1.66$
Hyperactive behavior by child during transition visits	Yes 63% No 75%	$\chi^2 = 2.33$	Yes 42% No 57%	$\chi^2 = 3.10^†$

(Continued)

**Table 3.** (Continued).

Variable	Percentages with any contact <sup>a</sup>	Statistical test and significance	Percentages with in-person visits	Statistical test and significance
Overfriendly behavior by child during transition visits	Yes 67% No 72%	$\chi^2 = 0.34$	Yes 51% No 51%	$\chi^2 < .01$
Anxious behavior by child during transition visits	Yes 65% No 74%	$\chi^2 = 1.47$	Yes 47% No 54%	$\chi^2 = 0.53$
Spacey behavior by child during transition visits	Yes 45% No 75%	$\chi^2 = 7.22^{**}$	Yes 30% No 55%	$\chi^2 = 4.14^*$

<sup>a</sup> Any contact means in-person visits, telephone calls or written contact through letters, social media, texts, or e-mails with prior foster parents after adoptive transition.  
 †  $p \leq .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 4.** Mean differences between groups with versus without posttransition contact of any sort or in-person visits.

Variable	Mean (S.D.) for children with posttransition contact <sup>a</sup>	Mean (S.D.) for children without posttransition contact <sup>b</sup>	Statistical test and significance	Mean (S.D.) for children with in-person visits	Mean (S.D.) for children without in-person visits	Statistical test and significance
Miles between foster and adoptive homes	273.0 (583.0)	595.0 (1452.7)	t = 1.63 <sup>†</sup>	132.2 (382.8)	598.9 (1218.1)	t = 3.65***
Travel time between foster and adoptive homes (in minutes)	165.1 (402.4)	331.6 (656.9)	t = 1.78 <sup>†</sup>	94.1 (127.5)	332.8 (666.7)	t = 3.48***
Number of children in foster home (aside from target child)	2.0 (2.1)	2.8 (2.8)	t = 2.01*	1.9 (2.0)	2.6 (2.6)	t = 2.15*
How many people designed the transition plan	3.5 (1.4)	2.5 (1.3)	t = 4.25***	3.3 (1.5)	3.1 (1.5)	t = 1.23
How much emotional sharing between adoptive and foster parents (on a 5-point scale)	2.7 (1.5)	1.5 (1.1)	t = 5.50***	2.8 (1.6)	1.9 (1.3)	t = 4.14***
Number of in-person transition visits between child and adoptive parents	5.2 (4.1)	2.8 (2.9)	t = 4.70***	5.9 (4.5)	3.1 (2.8)	t = 5.04***
Rating of stress for the child during the transition (on a 4-point scale)	2.7 (1.0)	3.0 (1.1)	t = 2.06*	2.7 (1.0)	2.8 (1.1)	t = 0.61
Rating of stress for the adult during the transition (adoptive and foster parents)	2.7 (1.0)	3.3 (0.9)	t = 3.47***	2.9 (1.0)	2.9 (1.0)	t = 0.04
Rating of how well the transition helped the child form a bond with the adoptive parents (on a 5-point scale)	2.2 (1.2)	3.4 (1.4)	t = 5.62***	2.2 (1.2)	2.9 (1.4)	t = 3.65***
Rating of how well the transition helped the child shift the relationship with the foster parent	2.4 (1.2)	3.6 (1.4)	t = 5.88***	2.4 (1.2)	3.1 (1.4)	t = 3.95***
Time between the transition occurring and questionnaire being completed (in months)	33.9 (49.7)	42.9 (54.7)	t = 1.07	36.4 (54.5)	36.9 (48.9)	t = 0.51
Number of seven informational items shared by foster to adoptive parent	1.9 (1.9)	2.8 (2.2)	t = 2.06*	1.9 (2.0)	2.3 (2.1)	t = 1.06

<sup>a</sup>Any contact means in-person visits, telephone calls, or written contact through letters, social media, texts, or e-mails with prior foster parents after adoptive transition.  
<sup>†</sup>p < .10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001

oversight, questions about the racial make-up of the children and the parents were omitted. Proportions of children experiencing different forms of maltreatment were reported as: physical abuse 29%, sexual abuse 17%, neglect 76%, exposed to alcohol and drugs in utero 66%, exposed to domestic violence 55%, and lived with substance-abusing parents 69%. At the time of adoption, children were identified as receiving Early Intervention/special education services for 36% of the cases, mental health services in 45% of the cases, and ongoing medical monitoring for a chronic medical condition for 17% of the children. Adoptive parents were adopting for the first time 78% of the time. Other characteristics of the samples are presented in Tables 1–2. No descriptive variables were related to rates of posttransition contact or in-person visitation except whether any adoptive parent took parental leave as part of the transition process – 81% of children had some form of posttransition contact with their foster parents if their adoptive parents took parental leave, while that rate was 57% of children whose adoptive parents did not take parental leave ( $\chi^2 = 10.77, p < .001$ ).

**Respondent differences.** There were differences based on whether the respondent was a caseworker, a foster parent or an adoptive parent. Caseworkers completed the survey only if they were the caseworker for the child who was moved, and so when questioned about who planned the move, caseworkers identified themselves much more frequently as involved in the planning than did adoptive or foster parents. Foster and adoptive parents identified contact during the transition period between themselves at a higher rate than did caseworkers; caseworkers may not have been aware of it. However, caseworkers related higher rates of posttransition contact between adoptive and foster parents than did either of those groups. Adoptive parents, who likely had been involved in only one or a few adoptions, had a significantly longer average time (mean of almost 61 months) since the adoption had occurred that they were responding about compared to caseworkers (just under 19 months) or foster parents (just over 17 months). Also, when adoptive parents were respondents, the relationship between adoptive parent and child was more likely to be as non-related strangers than when the respondents were caseworkers or foster parents; perhaps because adoptive parents were largely recruited with the help of an adoptive parent resource center.

When foster parents were the respondent, it was significantly more common for the child to become the youngest child in the adoptive home and for the adoptive parents to not take parental leave and for the child to have been in the foster home for a longer period than for other kinds of respondents. When adoptive parents were the respondent, then the child was less likely to be receiving mental health services before the transition than if the respondents were foster parents or caseworkers. When caseworkers were the respondents,

there were fewer children in the foster home at time of transition and more people were involved in planning the transition than for either of the two groups of respondents.

Some comparisons were only between foster and adoptive parents because caseworkers were not asked. For instance, adoptive parents reported receiving information on foster parent parenting strategies (51%) at a lower rate than foster parents reported giving that information (79%) yet the reverse pattern was evident for giving birth family information where adoptive parents reported a higher rate of transmission (49%) than did foster parents (32%). In another set of differing results, adoptive parent respondents were significantly more likely to note overfriendly behavior on the part of the child during visits than were foster parent respondents yet adoptive parents noted significantly less anxiety on the part of the child during visits than did foster parents. Foster parents also identified more emotional sharing between foster and adoptive parents in their transitions than did adoptive parents. Also foster parents were significantly older than adoptive parents at the time of the transition (45 versus 38 years respectively).

**Gender Differences.** There were very few gender differences given the number of comparisons made. More females were sexually abused than males ( $p < .01$ ) and more females were rated as clingy during visits than were males ( $p = .01$ ). The child's therapist was involved at a significantly ( $p = .02$ ) higher rate in the planning of the transition for girls (24%) than for boys (12%) even though girls were not in therapy at a significantly high rate than boys before transition (50% and 39%, respectively;  $p = .14$ ).

**Time between survey and transition.** The length of time between when the survey was filled out and when the adoptive transition occurred was examined in relation to other variables in the study. There were three findings related to the child being in psychotherapy. Transitions that occurred more recently also had children who were more likely to be in psychotherapy ( $t = 2.29$ ,  $p = .02$ ). Transitions that occurred more recently also more likely had a child's psychotherapist involved in the transition planning ( $t = 3.47$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and also had the child's therapist talking to the child about the adoption ( $t = 2.98$ ,  $p = .004$ ).

The amount of time between survey completion and transition was also related to the method of writing used between the child and the foster parent. More recent transitions were associated with more likely use of texting ( $t = 4.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and social media ( $t = 2.46$ ,  $p = .02$ ) between adopted children and former foster parents. When combining letters, e-mails, texts, and social media into written communications, more recent transitions were linked with more likely use of written communication overall ( $t = 2.01$ ,  $p = .05$ ). There were no significant relationships between how recent the transition had been and either in-person visitation or phone calls between children and former foster parents.

There were other correlations that seemed to stand alone, with more recent transitions being related to:

- the child being older,
- the foster parent had been considered as an adoptive placement,
- the child was rated as anxious during the visits, or
- the transition was not rated as too short

When the length of time between transition and survey completion was controlled for in relevant analyses below, it did not change the statistical significance of any of the findings.

**Reverse visitation occurrence.** Children were in some form of contact with their former foster parents in 70% of the adoptions. They had in-person visits with their prior caregivers 49% of the time. Phone calls occurred between the children and former caregivers in 48% of the adoptions. Writing (letters, e-mail, social media, texts) was a form of contact for 66% of the children with their foster parents after the transition. First contact in any form between the children and former caregivers occurred on average 32 days (median 10 days) after the transition was concluded. When there were in-person visits, the first visit occurred at the adoptive home 45% of the time, at the foster parent's home in 22% of the instances, and in other locations (parks, restaurants, etc.) for 33% of the children.

**Relationships between reverse visitation and other variables.** One group of associations that can be seen in Tables 3–4 was between variables connected with the planning of the transition and reverse visitation. When foster parents were involved in the planning of the transition, there was some form of posttransition contact between children and their former foster parents 82% of the time versus visits only 47% of the time when foster parents were not involved in the planning ( $X^2 = 24.92, p < .001$ ). Relatedly, there were in-person visits between children and their prior caregivers 57% of the time when foster parents were involved in the planning against in-person visits 34% of the time when foster parents were not involved in the planning ( $X^2 = 8.63, p < .01$ ). Involvement of adoptive parents in the planning of the transition was also associated with posttransition contact of any sort (77%) versus the adoptive parents not being involved in the planning (56%;  $X^2 = 9.46, p < .01$ ). However, there was no association between adoptive parent involvement in transition planning and in-person contact with foster parents after the transition.

In contrast to the increase in contact or visits linked with the involvement of either the foster or adoptive parents in planning, when the child's caseworker was involved in the transition planning, there was less likelihood of in-person visits between foster parents and the child after the transition than when the caseworker was not a transition planner (46% vs. 67%;  $X^2 = 3.88, p < .05$ ). This effect was not apparent regarding contact of any kind between child and

former foster parents. There were no differences in rate of posttransition contact or visits based on the involvement of any other individual in the transition planning; whether it be the child's therapist, lawyer, or CASA or the adoptive parent's caseworker. There were more people involved overall in planning the transition (3.5 vs. 2.5;  $t = 4.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ) when there was any sort of posttransition contact between the child and former foster parent, although this difference was not significant for in-person visitation.

Another group of associations revolves around the relationship between the foster and adoptive parents. Respondents were asked to rate the amount of emotional sharing between adoptive and foster parents as part of the transition on a five-point scale. There were higher ratings of emotional sharing when there was any kind of posttransition contact versus not (2.72 vs. 1.52;  $t = 5.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and when there were in-person visits versus not (2.84 vs. 1.86;  $t = 4.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition to emotional sharing, respondents were asked whether information in each of seven categories (the child's daily routine, likes and dislikes, personality, history, behavior as well as birth family information and effective parenting strategies with the child) was shared with adoptive parents by foster parents and these were combined into a single variable – amount of shared information. When there was posttransition contact of any sort, there were higher rates of sharing information about the child from foster to adoptive parent ( $t = 2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, this association was not significant comparing if there were in-person visits or not.

The third group of associations involved the child's behavior during visits with the adoptive family during the transition. Respondents indicated if each of the six behaviors were present or not during visits the child had with adoptive parents: aggression, anxiety, hyperactivity, clinging, spaciness, and overfriendliness. If there was aggression (48% vs. 74%;  $X^2 = 6.15$ ,  $p = .01$ ) or spaciness (45% vs. 75%;  $X^2 = 7.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ) on the part of the child during visits with adoptive parents, then there was less of any sort of posttransition contact between the child and the former foster parents. This same pattern held for spaciness during transition visits which was connected to a lower rate of in-person visits (30% vs. 55%;  $X^2 = 4.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than when there was no spaciness reported.

A fourth set of associations was around practical aspects of the transition linking with posttransition contact. If there were in-person visits or even any kind of contact after the transition between the child and the former foster parents, then there were fewer children in the foster home ( $t = 2.15$ ,  $p < .05$  and  $t = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$  respectively). Also, if there were in-person visits, then it was likely that the adoptive and foster homes were physically closer together in mileage (132 miles vs. 599 miles on average;  $t = 3.65$ ;  $p < .001$ ). If there was contact of any kind between the child and foster parent after the transition, then there was a trend for the homes to be closer together (273 miles vs. 595 miles;  $t = 1.63$ ,  $p < .10$ ). In addition, if an adoptive parent took parental



leave for the adoptive transition, then it was more likely that there would be some kind of posttransition contact of some sort (81% vs. 57%;  $X^2 = 10.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ) although this was not significant for in-person visits.

A fifth collection of findings involved respondents' evaluative ratings of the transition and posttransition contact and in-person visits as can also be seen in Tables 3–4. Respondents rated how stressed the child was during the transition and how stressed they were (except for caseworkers) on a four-point scale (none, a little, somewhat, very). Both children (2.7 vs. 3.0;  $t = 2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and adults (2.7 vs. 3.3;  $t = 3.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were rated as less stressed with posttransition contact of some sort but there were no significant differences in rated stress levels associated with whether there were in-person visits posttransition. Respondents also rated both how well the transition helped the child both form a new relationship with the adoptive parents but also how well the child adjusted to the change in the relationship with the foster parents. In both ratings, the transition was evaluated higher when there was posttransition contact or posttransition in-person visits. Of the respondents who thought the transition was too short, 61% had posttransition contact between the child and foster parent; of those that thought the transition was just the right length, 85% had posttransition contact; and finally of those that thought the transition was too long, 47% had posttransition contact ( $X^2 = 29.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There was a similar pattern for posttransition in-person visits occurring in 35% of the cases where the transition was judged too short, 60% for the cases where the transition length was just right, and 33% for the cases where the transition was rated as too long ( $X^2 = 13.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The last evaluative rating was whether the transition could have been improved or not. Those transitions rated as being able to be improved included posttransition contact in 62% of the instances while the transitions rated as not needing any improvement had posttransition contact in 86% of the cases ( $X^2 = 12.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, transitions rated as having room for improvement included posttransition in-person visits for 39% of the children while those transitions not needing improvement included in-person visits after the transition 68% of the time ( $X^2 = 14.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

There were two variables related to the child's preparation for adoption that were related to posttransition contact of any sort but not posttransition in-person visitation between foster parents and the children. Children who were read to as part of their adoptive preparation (88% vs. 68%) or who talked to their caseworker about adoption (80 vs. 62%) were more likely to have had posttransition contact ( $X^2 = 3.89$ ,  $p < .05$  and  $X^2 = 4.06$ ,  $p < .05$  respectively).

Finally, it should be noted that the presence of both in-person visits and contact of any sort between the child and the former foster parents after the transition was over was associated with longer transitions, in terms of the number of visits between the child and the adoptive parents (5.86 vs. 3.14 visits;  $t = 5.04$ ,  $p < .001$  and 5.21 vs. 2.76 visits;  $t = 4.70$ ,  $p < .001$  respectively).

## Discussion

This study focused on the occurrence of in-person visits between adopted children and their former foster parents and also variables associated with those contacts. Children adopted out of the child welfare system in this study had contact of any form with their prior foster parents after 70% of the transitions and in-person visits with them 49% of the time. This posttransition contact often started within a month after the transition was completed. This is consistent with the small amount of prior research that has been reported. Neil et al. (2018) reported that 75% of adopted children had some form of contact with former foster parents and Sinclair et al. (2005) found that half of the children in their sample had in-person visits.

The foster parent appears to be a central player in the occurrence of contact between themselves and the child who has moved on to an adoptive home. Their involvement in planning the transition and the relationship formed between them and the adoptive parents, both informationally and emotionally, are all associated with the occurrence of posttransition contact and in-person visits.

These findings have important implications for foster parent training for at least two reasons. First, they are participants in reverse visitation and, based on the findings, in the planning of the transition and need to know what the goals of reverse visitation are and how they can respond to the child and deal with their own feelings. Secondly, if inclusion of reverse visitation is a goal for the adoptive transition process, then helping the foster parent proactively think about the relationship they are developing with the adoptive parents could be very important. Findings indicate that the relationship between foster and adoptive parents is influential in the occurrence of reverse visitation. Yet there is little information available for foster parents about reverse visitation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018, 2021). Training topics might include answering the child's questions, communicating, and validation of the adoptive placement, responding to adoptive parents' questions and concerns, and communicating the child's meaningfulness to them without burdening the child with any sadness the foster parent might have. Foster parents may have many emotions they are processing (e.g., loss, anger, regret, anxiety for the child) as the child is leaving (Hebert et al., 2013; Lynes & Sitcoe, 2019; Swain, 2016). Posttransition contact may be a final gift; the foster parent can give the child but they may need support for the emotional processing involved in the posttransition contact with the child.

Adoptive parent training regarding posttransition contact is also important. Although contact with birth parents and the degree of openness in an adoption is often now brought up with adoptive parents, some are not prepared for the idea of reverse visitation with former caregivers and are surprised when foster parents or caseworkers bring up the idea (Meakings et al., 2018).

Interestingly, when caseworkers were involved in planning of the transition, the rate of in-person visits between adopted children and former foster parents after transitions was lower. This finding was true despite the professional literature generally recommending such contact for decades, although not in every case. It is not clear if caseworkers in these instances were against the idea of reverse visitation as has been noted previously (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014). It is also possible that some characteristic of the child or the circumstances led both to the caseworker not being involved in transition planning and reverse visitation not occurring.

Aggression or spaciness on the part of the child during visits in the transition was associated with reduced occurrence of any sort of posttransition contact. This merits further investigation. One way these behaviors may be seen is as signs that the child's attachment behavioral system has been activated around the loss of their foster parents, their current attachment figures (Gray, 2007). Yet adoptive parents, and perhaps foster parents as well, may have interpreted these behaviors as reason to not have posttransition contact (Sinclair et al., 2005).

On the other hand, it is also possible that the child's behavior during visits may have had something to do with the developing relationship between the foster and adoptive parents which also influenced the likelihood of reverse visitation.

The first posttransition visit with foster parents has been recommended to occur in the adoptive home so as to not confuse the child (Fahlberg, 1991; Neil et al., 2020). However, in this study, this occurred less than half of the time. The reasons for this should be explored; is it a matter of training or adoptive parents' wariness about revealing the location of their home or child care issues for the foster parents' other children or some other reason?

Another finding is that the participants in this study rated adoptive transitions as better on a variety of evaluative criteria (was the transition the right length, how stressful was the transition, how good was the transition at helping the child with the relationship changes) if they included posttransition contact of some sort between foster parent and child and also if in-person visits after the transition occurred between foster parent and child. Given the current data, the directionality of this effect cannot be known.

The final finding is that the transition's practical characteristics affect reverse visitation. Lower mileage between foster and adoptive homes, an adoptive parent taking parental leave during the transition, a smaller number of children the foster parent is caring for all were linked with increased likelihood of in-person visits between former foster parents and the adopted child and/or contact of any sort between them after the transition. If reverse visitation becomes a priority, there may need to be practical supports available to make it more likely.

This exploratory study has several limitations; these limitations can act as a guide for future investigations. The sample for this study was not systematically sampled from all the adoptions in Oregon but rather from a convenience sample of attendees from trainings and those who responded to outreach from the Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center. Thus, there is no way of knowing how this sample may differ from the population of adoptions at large. In addition, the current research is based on adoptive transitions in only one state – gathering data from other jurisdictions with perhaps differing child welfare policies regarding adoptive transitions would be very valuable. There is only one respondent for each transition in this report. Even though there were no significant differences between the types of respondents and percentages of posttransition contact or in-person visits, multiple respondents about each adoption would provide differing viewpoints on interesting variables, e.g., child’s behavior during visits.

This study is also retrospective. The length of time between when the transition occurred and when the study was completed was not associated with occurrence of posttransition contact or in-person visits, however, it was related to variables associated with if the child had a psychotherapist and written forms of communication between child and former foster parent (e.g., texts and e-mail). A different research approach that collected data at the time of the transition would allow for respondents (foster parent, adoptive parent, and child) to not only answer factual questions but also reflect on their emotional state at different points in the transition process (i.e., first meeting between child and adoptive parent or first overnight visit). Longitudinal studies would also be important to look at in terms of whether there are effects of reverse visitation, positive or negative, on the adoptive relationship as it develops and on the rate of adoption disruption.

## Conclusions

This study has attempted to shed some light, albeit in an exploratory way, on the important question of the role of adopted children having contact with their former foster parents. Reverse visitation has been recommended on theoretical and clinical grounds for decades. Approximately half of the adopted children in this study had in-person contact with their former foster parents and about 70% of the children had some form of contact (phone, writing, in-person) with their former foster parents. An adoptive transition is often one of the biggest events in a child’s life. Child welfare professionals and researchers need to invest in studies to make sure we are doing the best we can by these children in the state’s custody during their adoptive transitions. Future empirical studies should focus on the utility and design of reverse

visitation, especially as it relates to foster parent retention and the course of attachment formation between adopted children and their adoptive parents.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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## Highlights

- Seventy percent of adopted children were in some form of contact with former foster parents
- Forty-nine percent of adopted children had in-person visits with former foster parents

Foster and adoptive parent variables were significantly associated with the occurrence of posttransition contact and/or in-person visits

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