

Practice Guide: Assessing and managing risk in post-adoption staying in touch plans

Many adopted children and young people feel some emotional strain when meeting or communicating with birth family members, as do their birth relatives and adoptive parents. The contact can sometimes feel strange and awkward and bring uncomfortable or distressing feelings to the surface.

Although contact can be painful or upsetting in the short term, it can be beneficial in the long term. Children and young people generally value having the opportunity to maintain these relationships even if they are quite difficult. Supporting children and young people with feelings of sadness or upset around meet ups and letter/digital exchanges provides an important opportunity for adoptive parents to help children and young people share and process their feelings, build closeness and demonstrate acceptance of the child's membership of two families.

When planning and reviewing keeping in touch plans with birth family members it is important to distinguish between contact that is harmful and that which is difficult, awkward or temporarily upsetting. Professionals need to be aware of the potential risks some meet-ups/exchanges with birth relatives may pose for the child and have strategies to address these – such as adding extra support, delaying, pausing or making changes to contact activity. It is important to take an individualised approach to each situation, aiming for a detailed and realistic understanding of each child and both of their families' specific needs and circumstances.

Potential risks/challenges

- > Contact with some birth relatives may perpetuate harmful relationships, make the child feel to blame for family troubles or confused by conflicting accounts of why they were adopted.
- > Poor quality or unreliable contact can make children feel rejected or forgotten.
- > Children may feel worried by evidence of their birth relatives' frailty, but this can also provide a useful reality check.
- > Adopted children are more likely than most to experience the death of a birth parent before they reach adulthood. This can make contact during childhood more important. Leaving it until the child is grown up may be leaving it too late. But the death of a birth relative can also be very upsetting, and children can feel that this loss is theirs alone, rather than a loss they share with their adoptive family.
- > Children may be exposed to moral values at odds with those of their adoptive parents.
- > Hostile birth relatives may seek to undermine the adoptive placement. However, many relatives who are opposed to adoption at the time of the final hearing come to be able to accept this with time and can support the child.
- > Children may be overwhelmed by contact that is too frequent to allow the child to regain emotional equilibrium between meet ups.
- > A too high frequency of contact (which can occur especially when the child sees a range of different birth relatives on different occasions), may get in the way of activities that cement the child's membership of their adoptive family, and/or exclude the child from other regular activities important to him or her.
- > Children may be at risk of further abuse or neglect during unsupervised contact (which rarely occurs in adoption) or if left to make their own arrangements during adolescence.

Minimising risk/challenges

- > The primary protection for adopted children is the reassuring presence of adoptive parents before, during and after contact visits or receiving a letter and their willingness to make decisions about contact based on a good understanding of the child's needs.
- > It can be difficult to find suitable venues and to work out roles and boundaries, but social work support can help to overcome such challenges and improve the quality of such visits.
- > The frequency of contact needs to be realistic given the child's relationships and activities in their adoptive family.
- > Adults may need to be given time to develop positive and trusting relationships with each other prior to meet ups with the child present, to help ensure a more positive and relaxed atmosphere is maintained.
- > Birth parents/relatives may need to be supported to interact positively with the child and adoptive family during exchanges/meet ups. **The Trauma Informed Approach to Family Time and Staying in Touch** leaflet adapted from an Australian team by Adoption England may be helpful.
- > Children who experience the death of a birth relative may need opportunities to grieve and support to cope with their loss, together with other birth relatives/their adoptive family.
- > Some children who have experienced severe abuse or neglect or exposure to domestic violence may show signs of re-traumatisation during contact. Persisting with such contact can undermine the child's trust in adoptive parents and impair the child's recovery; it may need to be paused and reconsidered later.
- > Adults should help children and young people to voice their wishes and feelings about contact, allowing them to express both positive and negative feelings about their birth family. It should be acknowledged that children's wishes and feelings about their adoption and birth family can drastically change and fluctuate over time, especially in the teenage years.
- > It should be made known to young people that any wishes for more information/contact will be taken seriously and that support from their trusted adults will be provided (avoiding the risk of unsupported self-initiated contact).
- > Keeping in touch plans should be regularly reviewed. Arrangements that do not change over time may cease to meet the child's needs, and even lead to young people initiating contact with birth relatives on their own/in secrecy without the support of their adoptive parents/professionals.

Addressing myths around risk

- > There is no evidence that well-managed contact affects children's overall development or their attachment to adoptive parents. Pre-placement experiences and the quality of care provided by adoptive parents are much more powerful influences.
- > There is no evidence that well managed contact with foster carers prevents children settling with adoptive families (see research summaries and reviews on their website for more information).
- > For additional briefings relating to considering risks and strengths when planning keeping in touch arrangements in individual cases see the briefings:
- > Assessing strengths and challenges of adopted children
- > Assessing strengths and challenges of birth / first family members
- > Assessing strengths and challenges of adoptive parents

Click [here](#) to view all of the *Staying in touch: Contact after adoption* resources.

An open access resource hub for practitioners working with individuals to maintain meaningful relationships after adoption.

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