

Working with adoptive parents to understand contact: Practice Guide

This guide summarises points for preparing adopters in cases where either face-to-face meet-ups or letter/indirect contact has been assessed as being an appropriate plan for their child.

Understanding the context

- > Meeting up with your child and their birth family or writing to them are strange situations for which there are no established social rules.
- > Direct contact visits are highly personal but take place between virtual strangers often in impersonal circumstances. There may be little opportunity for adults to build relationships or talk away from the child.
- > There is no one right way to be an adoptive kinship network. Each family will need to find their own level of comfort in their relationships rather than follow a set of restrictive or unnecessary rules.

Coping with difficult feelings about contact

- > Adoptive parents may find contact emotionally demanding because of worry about their child, strong feelings about the harm they suffered and sadness for birth parents. For some adoptive parents, contact with the birth family is a painful reminder that they are not biologically related to their child.
- > Children's upset before and after contact can be hard for adoptive parents but is also a chance to build closeness and talk about and process feelings.
- > Any awkwardness or challenges that children and adoptive families may experience around contact need to be balanced with the risks of not having contact. Children with no contact can struggle with fear and fantasies about their birth family, or struggle to fully understand why they were adopted.
- > Outcomes for adopted children can vary widely. These variations tend to relate to factors such as pre-placement experiences, age at placement, and quality of adoptive family life. Having, or not having, birth family contact seems largely unrelated to **overall** development. However, ongoing safe and meaningful contact does contribute to the young person's positive sense of adoptive identity.
- > Adoptive parents generally act quickly to stop or pause direct contact if it is harmful to the child.

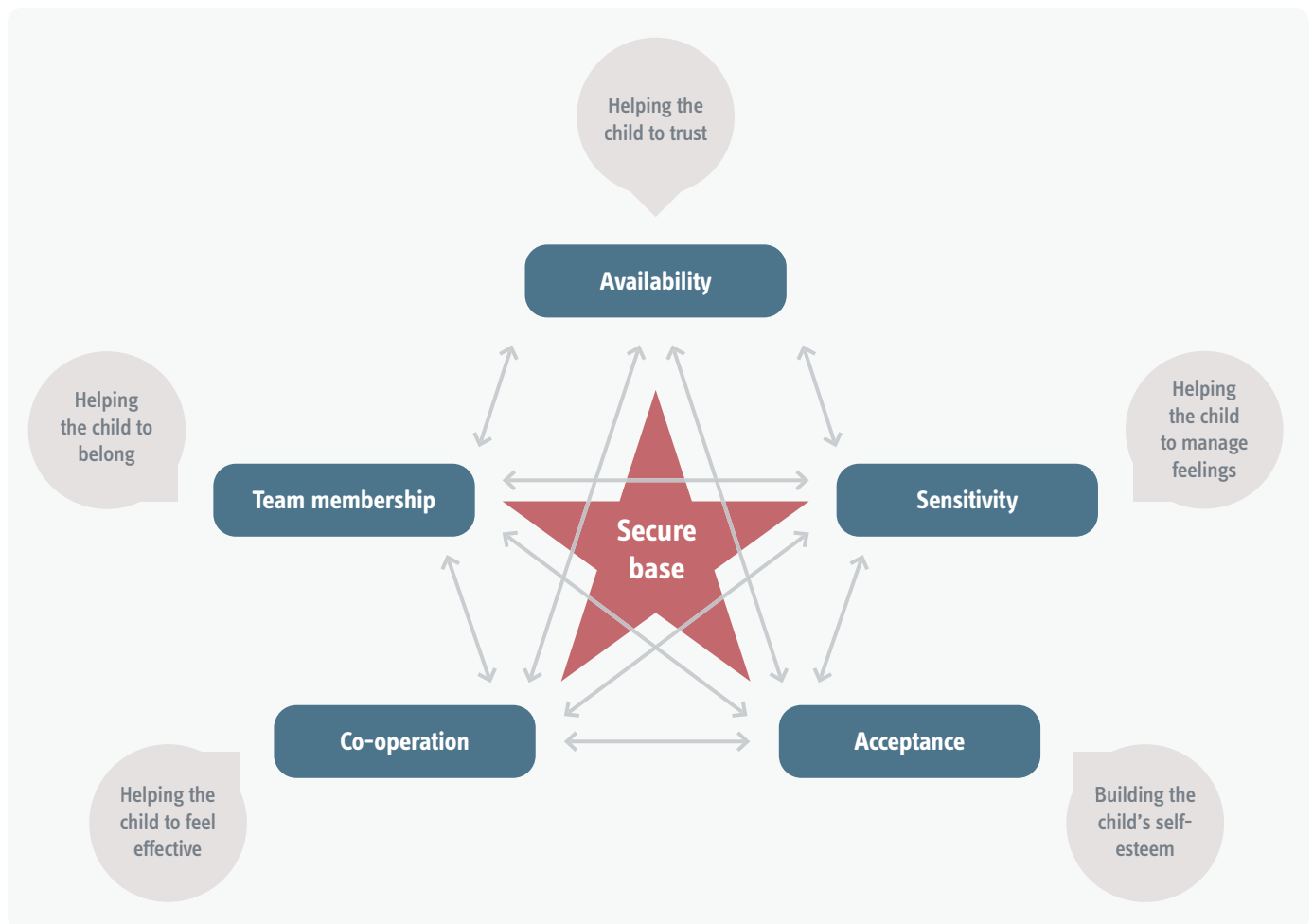
Benefits of contact

- > Adoptive parents value contact even if it is difficult when it helps their child by: showing they are loved; reassuring them that they are not forgotten; increasing understanding about their birth family and why they were adopted.
- > Most adopted children are interested in their birth family, at least at some stage of their lives, even if they have no conscious memories of them.
- > Adoptive parents value the opportunity to learn more about the child and their family history; having contact with the birth relatives can help to ease anxiety about them contacting the child in future in an unplanned way.
- > Contact is an opportunity for children and their adoptive families to talk about the birth family and show that children's feelings and curiosity are accepted. This kind of 'communicative openness' is strongly valued by adopted young people and adults and helps children do well in adoption.
- > Contact with birth grandparents and siblings often works particularly well. Some extended family members can be integrated into the adoptive family and be a valuable source of support for the child.
- > Contact through social media can work well alongside other positive forms of contact; it is more likely to be difficult if driven by unmet contact needs.
- > Parents of children who were taken into care are both physically and emotionally vulnerable and more likely to die prematurely. Contact provides opportunities for connection that could otherwise be lost forever leading to lifelong regret and unanswered questions for the adopted person.
- > If adopted young people choose to cut off contact with birth relatives, they can appreciate having learnt about them directly and being trusted to make the decision themselves.

What practitioners can do to help

- > Give clear messages about the potential benefits of post-adoption contact at every stage of recruiting, assessing and training adopters. This needs to focus on the lifelong needs of the adopted child but should also include the potential benefits for birth relatives and for adoptive parents themselves.
- > Involve people with lived experience of adoption (adoptees, birth parents/relatives, adoptive parents) in training around this topic to bring the issue to life and build empathy for everyone involved.
- > Avoid terms/reference to birth relatives and contact which can present it as an optional extra or inherently risky.
- > Create spaces where adoptive parents can be open and honest about any worries they might have about maintaining contact with the child's birth family. It is important that adopters can share these feelings and professionals can help them think about all the pros and cons of contact in a balanced way. Prospective adoptive parents might be worried about saying the wrong thing about contact, or concerned about airing worries that seem in opposition to the agency's view. Therefore, it can be helpful for social workers to raise potential anxieties to show that these feelings are normal.
- > Provide opportunities for adoptive parents to connect with other adoptive parents who can share advice about how to support children's birth family connections.
- > Help adoptive parents to understand the kind of feelings that birth relatives might have and the kind of underlying difficulties that might make contact hard (such as alcohol misuse or mental health problems).
- > Encourage adoptive parents to think about their child's long-term identity needs as well as their immediate needs for care and protection.
- > Prepare for how things may change in adolescence, talk about social media from the start.
- > If relationships between the adults are working well, contact is more likely to work well. An early meeting between adopters and birth relatives without the child present can help relationships to get off to a good start. [see practice briefing on setting up early meetings]
- > Take a proactive role in getting contact started, easing communication between the adults and helping both parties to understand each other.
- > Set up early reviews of how contact is going and suggesting ways that it might be improved.
- > Provide practical help with travel arrangements, letter writing, venues, etc.
- > Provide emotional support for adoptive parents before and after visits or letter exchange, acknowledge strong feelings.
- > Focus on promoting good relationships between the adults involved so that the child feels reassured. Further separate adult-to-adult meetings or mediation may be important.
- > Attend contact if needed in an active, supportive role rather than a supervisory role.
- > Be clear about roles and expectations.
- > Respect the adoptive parents' role in making decisions about contact for their child and ensure that they feel in control; step in to help with boundaries if needed and listen to their worries about the child's response to contact. Adoptive parents differ in terms of their comfort with and confidence about supporting birth family connections. When thinking about managing risk and boundaries take a case-by-case approach rather than having a standard practice across the agency.
- > Encourage adoptive parents to think creatively and work collaboratively with the birth relatives to maintain a positive connection.
- > Adoptive parents often worry that birth family connections might threaten their relationship with their child. Support adoptive parents to think about how helping their child understand, make sense of and (where appropriate) maintain birth family connections builds the child's secure base in the adoptive family (see following page).

Using the 'Secure base model' to help adoptive parents understand how to support children's birth family connections.



- > Availability: be physically and emotionally available to children to support them with birth family connections, being mindful of how their past relationships may have built or breached the child's trust.
- > Sensitivity: be sensitive to children's thoughts and feelings about their birth family/identity help children to acknowledge, name and manage these feelings.
- > Acceptance: show non-judgemental acceptance of both the strengths and difficulties of birth family members - this can help the child build a positive sense of self and identity.
- > Cooperation: work together with the child to establish what level of openness they are comfortable with. According to their age and understanding, allow children to make safe and appropriate choices around birth family connections.
- > Family membership: help children feel that they can identify with and be a part of their adoptive family **and** their birth family.

(Adapted from Neil, E & Beek, M (2020) 'Respecting children's relationships and identities in adoption' in G. Wrobel, E. Helder, & E. Marr (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Adoption* (pp76-89)

University of East Anglia Secure Base model: [The Secure Base model - Professor Gillian Schofield and Dr Mary Beek - Groups and Centres \(uea.ac.uk\)](#)