

Practice Guide: Setting up introductory meetings between birth relatives and adoptive parents

Introduction

- > The best situation for adopted children is when they feel able to talk openly about their birth family and their adoption with their parents. It helps for them to have stories and information about their history and birth family and a good understanding of why they needed to be adopted. Maintaining safe and meaningful contact is helpful, and it is important that adults can empathise with each other and collaborate to support the child's needs.
- > Adoptive and birth families start their journey of connection together at a time of intense and difficult emotions; a less than ideal foundation for building empathy and collaboration. They often come from very different background experiences and social groups which can get in the way of mutual understanding.
- > Whatever the future plan for contact, research has shown that an early face-to-face meeting between adults can help support the relationship between the two families to get off to a more positive start. If the plan is for letter exchange it can benefit all to 'put a face to' and gain greater understanding of the person they are writing to. If face-to-face contact is being considered, a well facilitated meeting can get the relationship off to a good start and help people get a sense of how they want future meetings to go.

Practice around introductory meetings

- > In the past, early face-to-face meetings between adults in adoption have often been referred to as a 'one-off' meeting. However, this provides an impression that the event will not be repeated, rather than suggesting an ongoing relationship that may need to develop and adjust as the child grows and adults change. It is recommended that terms such as 'early', 'initial' or 'introductory' meeting are used instead.
- > Some agencies appear much more successful at organising early meetings between birth relatives and adoptive parents. It is likely this is because of differences in birth family support and expectations given to adoptive parents. Research has consistently shown the immense value of these meetings, so all agencies should ensure they take place if possible.
- > Meetings have traditionally been more frequently organised between adoptive parents and birth mothers, and less often with fathers and rarely with grandparents. Yet meetings can also be very valuable and important in these situations. In the case of some elderly relatives, the early meeting may realistically end up being the only opportunity for adopters to meet them and gain information and stories that could benefit their child in the future, helping them to make sense of their parents' life journeys and choices.

Benefits of bringing birth family members and adoptive parents together in an early meeting

- > The meeting has huge potential to bring people together into a collaborative relationship by helping people to understand each other, and improving the quality of whatever form of contact is planned.
- > Even just one face-to-face meeting can have a powerful impact, providing a personal insight into the real person behind names and labels, and reducing misconceptions and fears.
- > The meeting may be an important opportunity to share what will be appreciated by each party in contact arrangements, especially in letters which may otherwise need to depend on assumptions around what is wanted.
- > Knowing that their birth and adoptive parents have met and worked at forming a relationship can help children experience adults as unifying, supportive and child-focused, confirming that they can love and feel part of both families.

Benefits named by adopters in UEA research include:

- > Gaining a holistic and concrete picture to share with their child.
- > Learn more about their child's history including positive elements of their birth family.
- > Helping them to understand where physical and psychological attributes may come from.
- > Having confirmation that the birth relative is happy for them to be the child's parent.
- > Feeling less anxious about future post-18 contact.

Benefits identified by birth relatives include:

- > Although finding it very emotionally challenging, the majority of birth relatives were pleased to have met the adoptive parents and left the meeting feeling positive towards them. Some birth family members (the majority of whom did not want their child to be adopted) described the meeting as "fantastic", "brilliant", or "lovely".
- > Most felt reassured that their child would be well looked after and loved.
- > Some felt reassured that their child would be told about them and/or that the adopters would keep up contact.
- > Seeing the positive attitude of adoptive parents towards meeting them helped them to feel valued and worthy.
- > Some felt their pain was acknowledged and they were respected by the adopters.
- > Some people expressed it was much easier to respond in contact having met the adopters.

Challenges identified by birth relatives include:

- > All parties will need support. Meeting face-to-face at this difficult time can be very challenging and emotional.
- > Birth family members may feel upset and overwhelmed. In the UEA longitudinal study, a couple of birth mothers seemed too overwhelmed by their own grief/guilt to connect to the adoptive parents in any way.
- > First impressions can have lasting effects and for some people this may be a one-off event that may never be able to be repeated. It is important that all are prepared adequately, and distressing surprises or mis-met expectations avoided.
- > There is always the possibility that the meeting will make people feel more negatively about each other, although research shows this to be in a minority of cases.
- > People need to be prepared before meeting; it is not a simple administrative exercise and should not be rushed. However, time put into this important event can have significant pay offs in the future.
- > Time may need to be given before the meeting to help birth family members adjust to facts about the adopters that they may find hard to accept – such as their relationship status, sexual orientation or cultural heritage.
- > Sometimes face-to-face meetings may be impossible or feel too unsafe, for example if the birth relative is in prison, or the adoptive parents should not be recognised/identified.

How to help make meetings positive

- > The importance of the meeting and its long-term benefits for the adopted person should be made clear to adoptive parents/social workers. It should not be presented as an 'optional extra' but as an integral part of the child's right to know their story.
- > Think more broadly around the relatives who could be included in an early meeting with the adopters. Ideally, a meeting should be organised with anyone with whom contact is being considered and/or who could offer useful assistance around the child's future identity needs. Aim for a meeting with at least one member of both the paternal and maternal families, and carers of brothers and sisters.
- > If face-to-face meetings are impossible or feel too unsafe, other ways to help adults connect should be considered such as via a video call, video message or phone conversation. The immediacy of some type of two-way direct communication can still help.
- > The emotional impact of the meeting for both parties must be considered, and appropriate preparation and support put in place so that the benefits of this important opportunity are maximised.
- > Flexibility around how and when the meetings happen can also be important. Agency expectations and timescales may not fit in with the emotional readiness of birth relatives and adoptive parents. For some birth relatives, meeting the adoptive parents can be impossible in the early months after the adoption. The meeting may need to be re-offered at different stages after the adoption (such as a year or two later) when emotions have had a chance to settle.
- > Receiving a positive letter from adoptive parents can help birth parents feel more able to attend a meeting. For example, a settling in letter or card which helps birth parents to see that their child is being well cared for, and some information about the adoptive parents and their home.
- > Time should be given to meet with birth relatives and adoptive parents separately before the meeting and listen to the fears around and expectations of the meeting and help them prepare.
- > Birth family members may need time and support to adjust to facts about the adopters that they may find hard to accept – such as their relationship status, gender, sexual orientation, or cultural heritage. Knowing research outcomes around, for example, same sex adoptive parents, and hearing from older adopted young people raised in similar family settings may help.
- > Adoptive parents may need to be supported to empathise with and be prepared for the emotional state and capabilities of the birth relative during the meeting.
- > Preparation should include giving time to thinking through questions that each adult may have or information that they are keen to share – some may be unable to speak, or struggle to remember their questions or things they wanted to share in the heat of the moment.
- > Support workers can try to gather information that may help people to connect and break the ice – for example interests or hobbies they may have in common, or shared hopes and aspirations for the child.
- > People could be encouraged to bring photos or mementos to the meeting that can provide insight into their lifestyle and character (e.g. pictures of their home and garden, photos of the child's bedroom or favourite toys, people's hobbies or artwork or a family tree). Birth relatives may value having things to take away that can remind them of their child such as drawings or handprints, or a duplicate of their child's favourite teddy.
- > Time may be needed for reflection and debrief after the meeting.
- > An acknowledgement letter sent to the birth parents from the adoptive parents after the meeting can be helpful, showing that their contribution was valued and appreciated.

Things to think about:

- > Is the venue neutral, welcoming and comfortable with refreshments and space for time out?
- > Does the meeting have a clear aim and structure? Do all have realistic expectations?
- > Who will facilitate the meeting? Do they have all the information they need on the individuals?
- > How will people be introduced? First names? Nick names?
- > How will the room be set up? What order will people come in?
- > What are the transport arrangements? Do they take into account the emotional impact of the meeting?
- > How much time is available for the meeting? Can this be flexible or paused if the meeting becomes too distressing or difficult, or more time is needed?
- > What questions do people want to ask each other?
- > What messages do people want to give each other?
- > What do people want to bring to give to or show each other?
- > What ground rules/boundaries are needed? How do people feel about these? Can they stick to them? What may help?
- > What information do people want to share and what do they not want to be shared?
- > Can photos be taken as a lasting memory? Are there other ways the meeting could be captured?
- > Can someone take notes during, or soon after, the meeting so things that are shared can be remembered in the future (making clear that this is the sole purpose of the note taking)?
- > How will the meeting be brought to an end?

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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