



Contact: making good decisions for children in public law. Frontline Briefing

Introduction

'A central aim of care should be to strengthen lifelong relationships.' (MacAlister, 2022, p. 18).

The extent to which children and young people growing up in adoption, fostering or kinship care are supported to keep in touch safely with birth relatives and other important people from their past – including siblings, friends, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and previous carers – has lifelong implications for everyone involved. These relationships can mitigate loss and the damage of separation, provide love and reassurance, connection to family history, religion and culture as well as support into adulthood.

This briefing is aimed at those involved in helping children keep in touch with their own history and with important people when they are fostered, adopted or in kinship care, including social workers, those who support and supervise visits and letter exchange, independent reviewing officers, support workers, children's guardians and therapists who work with children and their families. It focusses on families involved in public rather than private law.

The briefing summarises evidence in relation to:

- > The recognition of the benefits of keeping in touch and the drive to modernise adoption
- > Increased understanding of the potential challenges of contact in kinship and foster care.
- > The opening up of new possibilities for digital communication following the pandemic.
- > A growing understanding of face-to-face visits as just one part of a wider approach to maintaining connection, including digital communication and the exchange of information as well as life story work
- > The importance of professional support, communication and mutual respect between the adults involved, flexibility in response to changing circumstances and that attention to children's wishes and feelings is emphasised throughout.
- > Contact plans still needing to be based on knowledge of the unique circumstances of each child, their family and carers as well as an understanding of trauma, identity, separation and loss.

It comprises two key sections:

Part One: The foundations of keeping in touch (p.5)

- > Legislation
- > Who is important?
- > Children's voices: research
- > Children's voices: in practice
- > The purpose of keeping in touch
- > Who should be included?
- > Impact of direct contact
- > Keeping in touch and identity
- > Working with parents.

Part Two: Keeping in touch and the child's journey through care (p.12)

- > Family time in care proceedings
- > Making and reviewing longer term plans
- > Kinship care
- > Long- and short-term foster care
- > Adoption
- > Other ways of keeping in touch
- > Letters
- > Online communication
- > Supporting connections

Terminology

The language around this subject has changed over time – from ‘access’ to ‘contact’ to ‘family time’ or ‘keeping touch’. No one word will be right for every family, for example some long-term fostered children see ‘family time’ as the time they spend with their carers. It is important to use terms that normalise interactions and relationships and are appropriate for the particular child and adults you are working with.

There are many different ways that children and young people can stay in touch with their birth family. In this briefing, the words ‘contact’ and ‘keeping in touch’ are used as umbrella terms to describe the range of communication options, including letters, phone calls, online meetings, exchanges of information and visits. The words ‘meet ups’, or ‘face-to-face’ / ‘direct’ contact are used to refer to meeting in person, whilst ‘indirect’ or ‘letterbox’ contact refer to other types of communication. ‘First family’, ‘birth parents’ and ‘family of origin’ are used interchangeably.

Part One: The foundations of keeping in touch

The key question is not whether or how much contact has a meaningful impact on children and young people's well-being, but how best to facilitate positive experiences and the meaningful involvement of the people who matter to the child. (Iyer et al., 2020a, p.1).

Legislation

The child's welfare is paramount in relation to contact and the court is required to have regard to the child's ascertainable wishes and feelings (in light of his or her age and understanding), his or her needs, the likely effect of any changes in circumstances, any harm suffered and how capable parents and other family members are of meeting the child's needs.

The complexity of legal arrangements and variation in access to support and reviewing contact creates a risk that plans for keeping in touch are determined by placement type rather than a particular child's needs, as well as increasing complexity when planning for sibling groups. The key acts in relation to contact include:

- > **The Children and Families Act 2014:** the local authority has a duty to allow reasonable contact for looked after children; plans are reviewed at looked after children's reviews. Foster carers do not have parental responsibility, which is shared by the local authority and parents. 'Delegated authority' allows foster carers to make some day-to-day decisions about children's lives, including in relation to contact if agreed in the child's care plan.
- > **The Adoption and Children Act 2002:** requires that contact is considered prior to making an adoption order. S.26 of this act allows for a contact order to be made to cover the period between placement order and adoption order; s.51A allows for an order for contact to be made with or after the adoption order. Such orders are routinely made in Northern Ireland but little used elsewhere: without an order contact is at the adopters' discretion.
- > **The Children and Families Act 2014:** requires contact in adoption to be balanced with the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the adopted child, considering the importance of the relationship and the potential for disruption.
- > **The Special Guardianship (Amendment) Regulations 2016:** requires the local authority to make plans for supporting contact. Special guardians share parental responsibility and are able to vary contact plans, although birth parents can return the matter to court.

Children's voices: research

Seeing their first family is important to most children even if it is difficult. Whilst most research emphasises that quality is more important than quantity, when asked directly, looked after children and young people say that **frequency** of family time is just as important. Long gaps between visits are hard. Young people are deeply hurt when parents don't attend and worry they might have died. They want fun, ordinary activities, out and about or in homely surroundings at convenient times. Children dislike long car journeys and worry about how much visits cost their parents. They want flexible arrangements that change as they grow up and help to improve relationships, not intrusive supervision. Children also want to have some say over who they see but accept that contact sometimes has to be stopped for their own safety (Boddy et al., 2013). They want to be listened to if they ask for visits to stop (Selwyn & Lewis, 2023).

The Adoption Barometer survey (Adoption UK, 2022) found that 80% of adult adoptees who had participated in face-to-face meetings as they grew up were glad to have done so. Adopted adult respondents generally agreed that direct post-adoption contact should be the norm, although those who had experienced this were less likely to agree (63%) than those who had not (76%). The severance of contact had lifelong significance and was a source of regret for many. Some called for radical reform of the whole post adoption contact system.

Children's voices: in practice

Children's wishes and feelings about keeping in touch with important people can be complicated and changeable. It may be hard for them to say what they want because of feelings of fear, guilt, responsibility or torn loyalties (Iyer et al., 2020a). It's important to be clear that adults have the ultimate responsibility for decisions and paying attention to how a child is before, during and after contact as well as their verbally expressed views (MacDonald, 2020).

Ordinary childhood responses to greeting or leaving a much missed person – anger, tears, shyness or ignoring them at first – need to be distinguished from indications of re-traumatisation such as freezing, zoning out, laughing without obvious mirth, sexualised or ingratiating behaviour. Supervision can provide physical but not emotional safety in such circumstances, even when parents have made significant changes.



Further reading

[Click here](#) to access Mandi MacDonald's resources for a trauma sensitive approach to family time.

[Click here](#) to see tools to support direct work with children.

The purpose of keeping in touch

Plans for keeping in touch need to be based on the child's needs in the short and long term – an unfamiliar grandmother may not mean much to a toddler but come to provide support in adulthood, along with a connection to family history and culture. Identifying the **purpose** of contact is the first step in making a contact plan. This will vary, depending on the circumstances of each child, family and placement and may change over time (Neil et al., 2015). The **purpose** of contact may be to:

- > Build or maintain relationships.
- > Assure a child they are loved and remembered.
- > Ease the pain of separation and loss.
- > Give permission to settle in a new family.
- > Support reparation and recovery after abuse.
- > Provide a reality check.
- > Reassure that birth relatives are alive and well.
- > Help children to understand their identity, family history, culture and religion now or in the future (particularly for ethnically minoritised children).
- > Support life story work and allow children to ask questions about why they do not live with birth parents.
- > Potential source of support and connection to wider family in adulthood.
- > Reduce the risk of unplanned, secret contact.

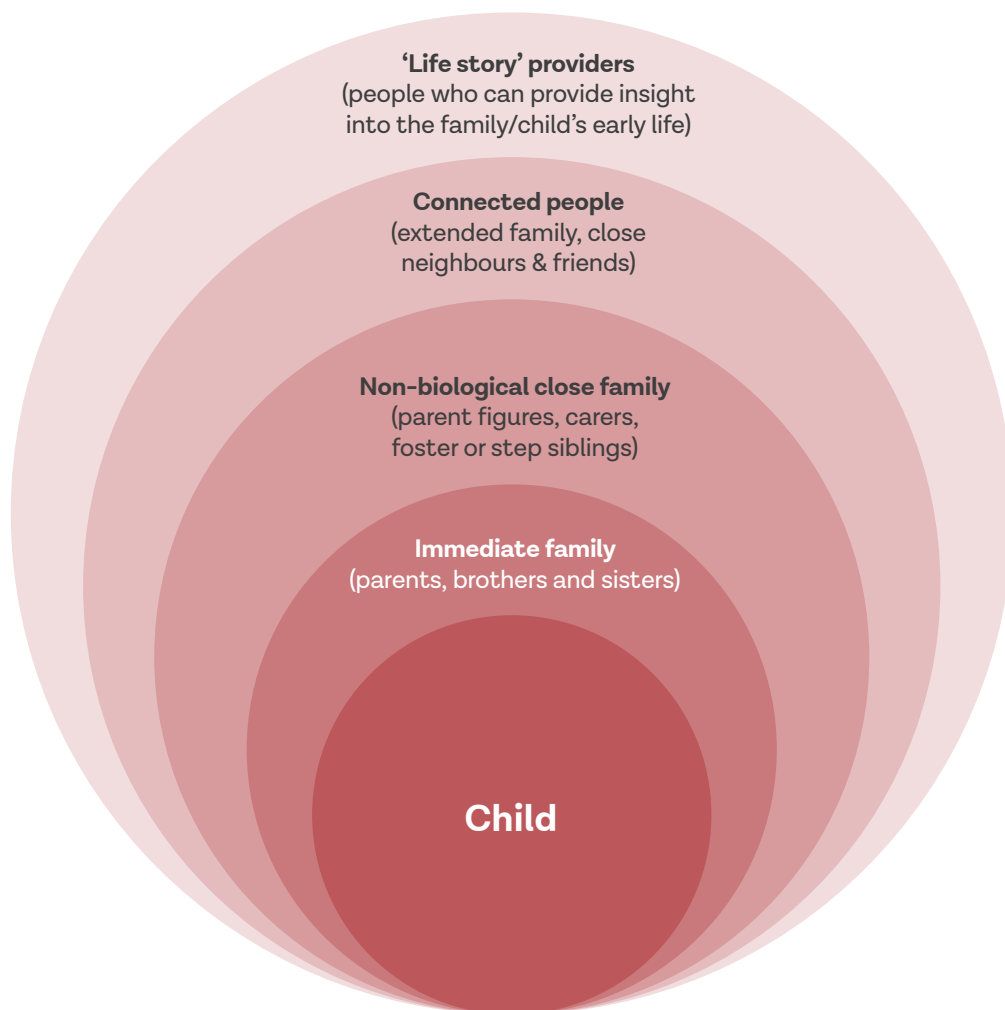
During care proceedings, family time can increase understanding of family relationships, identify support needed and provide an opportunity for intervention, informing decisions about placement and future contact. Keeping in touch can also provide reassurance and solace for birth parents, build relationships between parents and carers and help new families to understand the child better, providing these benefits do not come at the expense of harm to the child.

Who should be included?

When making keeping in touch plans it's important to think about children and adults who:

- > Have a positive relationship with the child and where there is no good reason for this relationship to end.
- > Care about, love or want to support the child throughout their life.
- > Can help the child learn about their life story and identity, now or in the future.

An eco-gram is needed as well as a genogram because sometimes unrelated people – like neighbours, teachers or foster carers – can be very important to children.



Plans for keeping in touch often focus on mothers – this relationship is often of particular emotional significance, making it both important and challenging for some children. A broader focus is needed to include fathers (who are less likely to be included in plans) as well as current carers, extended family and friends. Plans for keeping in touch need to consider the purpose of contact for each individual and prioritise the most important relationships in order to avoid overwhelming the child and their new family.

Sibling contact is generally important, enjoyable and sustainable at a relatively high level, providing a link to family history (Cossar & Neil, 2013; Neil et al., 2018; Selwyn & Lewis, 2023). Children and young people don't tend to distinguish between full, half and stepbrothers and stepsisters and may also see others in placement as siblings (Selwyn & Lewis, 2023).



Further reading

Where are my brothers and sisters? (Argent, 2011) is a useful booklet for exploring sibling relationships with children.

Click [here](#) to read more about the new CoramBAAF 'Sibling Time' project, bringing brothers and sisters together to have fun.

Click [here](#) to read more about the Lifelong Links Project that aims to create enduring support networks for care experienced young people, including adoptees.



Reflective questions

- > Do you know who the children you are working with regard as siblings?
- > How often do you include fathers, grandparents, current carers, cousins, friends or pets in family time plans?

Impact of direct contact

Multiple studies across various placement types draw some consistent findings regarding direct contact (Iyer et al., 2020a):

Potential benefits of direct contact	Potential harms of direct contact
Well managed, skilfully facilitated contact that takes children's views into account is associated with positive short and long-term outcomes including increased prospects of reunification for children in care, placement stability, improved emotional well-being, a stronger sense of identity and improved relationships with birth families and carers.	Contact that is inflexible, poorly managed or poorly supported is associated with negative outcomes.
Well facilitated sibling contact is associated with a positive effect on children's mental health and ongoing relationships.	Witnessing adult conflict is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety and behavioural difficulties for children. Exposure to birth parents' difficult or unpredictable behaviour can be associated with a reduced sense of security, distress, feeling rejected and poorer relationships with carers.
Well managed family time with grandparents and extended family can provide security and stability and increase support in adulthood – particularly for those who do not have a connection with parents.	Children may experience abuse or neglect during unsupervised contact or when left to make their own arrangements as teenagers.
Contact is beneficial if it is set at a frequency that feels right for this child, at this time, with this particular person, in line with the purpose of keeping in touch and the nature of their placement.	Overly frequent visits can disrupt babies' routines and make it hard for them to settle. Older children may struggle to regain equilibrium or miss out on family life in their permanent placement.

The potential risks and benefits for any particular child may change over time; family time may be positive in one way and negative in another. Contact that is upsetting is not necessarily harmful to a child's well-being (Iyer et al., 2020a). However, for a small number of children, the right plan is for no contact – others need a pause or a review of support. Terminating contact is not risk free and may increase the likelihood of older children making unplanned contact to birth parents who potentially present a safeguarding risk (Adoption UK, 2022).

Keeping in touch and identity

‘Contact is like searching for an identity. I just feel like that’s a big thing.’ Adopted young person quoted in ‘My People’ (CVAA, 2023, p.3).

Birth families continue as a strong psychological presence for most children growing up in substitute care, especially during adolescence – they are in children’s hearts and minds, whether or not they see them or talk about them. Adopted children have higher self-esteem and a more cohesive sense of identity when placed with carers who are comfortable with difference, able to accept they belong to two families and have thoughts, feelings and questions about their origins – known as **‘communicative openness’** (Beckett et al., 2008; Brodzinsky, 2006).

For those growing up outside their family of origin, keeping in touch with birth relatives can help manage their sense of dual identity, particularly when adults co-operate. It can also involve difficult transitions, painful feelings and memories (Beek & Schofield, 2004). Children in kinship care tend to have a strong sense of belonging, but thinking about the child’s history can still be challenging for family carers, especially if adult relationships remain difficult (Farmer, 2010).

Making sense of who you are and where you come from is an ongoing developmental task for all children and young people. For those growing up away from their birth parents, this can be particularly complicated, especially if they do not share an inherited identity with their new family. Family time can help children to make sense of their history and heritage – but it is not the only way. Life story work, news and information about important people and opportunities to connect with culture and religion through food, stories, religious observance and language all have a part to play. Other aspects of identity – such as ethnicity, sexuality, locality, interests and talents – may have more, or less, importance than family heritage over time.



Further reading

Frontline Briefing: Expressions of Self: supporting minoritised children’s identity

Practice Tool: Understanding, Exploring and Supporting Children’s Identity Development

Practice Tool: Life Story Work

Working with parents

Parents who lose children into care have high levels of loss and trauma in their own histories. Child removal is a traumatic, stigmatised loss without grieving rituals; it can escalate existing difficulties and lead to additional loss – including relationships, income and housing (Broadhurst & Mason, 2013, 2020; Philip et al., 2020). Maternal trauma from removal may be reactivated each time they part at the end of family time (Collings et al., 2022). When babies are removed at birth, mothers need additional emotional and practical support with travel arrangements whilst they recover from the birth (Mason et al., 2023). The experiences of fathers and parents with learning difficulties/disabilities (who are disproportionately likely to experience child removal) are less well-researched (Burch et al., 2024 ; Phillip et al., 2020).

The extent to which parents can think about their child’s needs or work with carers at this moment of crisis is not a good indication of how they may manage keeping in touch longer term. There is some evidence that supporting parents with the loss of their child helps improve the quality of their contact (Adolfsson et al., 2021; Boddy et al., 2020; Pause, 2021). There is also evidence that specialist models of family time support improve parental experience and attendance (Taplin et al., 2020). In the longer term, there is an association between parents coming to terms with their grief and positive contact, although the relationship between these factors is complex (Bengtsson & Karmsteen, 2020; Neil, 2006; Neil et al., 2013). Keeping in touch remains both important and painful for many birth parents (Davies et al., 2023, Neil et al., 2013; Schofield et al., 2011), potentially providing reassurance or raising anxiety about the child’s care.

Mothers and fathers, including those with difficulties/disabilities, need support in their own right, not least because children worry about them and want them to receive help (Selwyn & Lewis, 2023). Across placement types, parents identify the quality of their relationship with the child's carer as central to family time, and these adult relationships are critical for children too (Collings & Wright, 2022; Neil et al., 2015; Schofield et al., 2011). Birth parents' relationships with supportive professionals, including social workers, are also important. They value practical and financial assistance, information sharing, compassion and respect (Haight et al., 2001; Larkin et al., 2015; Neil et al., 2013).

'Birth parents who are hostile to the planned placement at final hearing may be able to accept and support the new family with time' (Neil, 2006).



Reflective questions

- > How often do you go back to talk to birth families as children grow up?
- > What support is available for parents regardless of their child's placement type?
- > How soon after removal can they access this?
- > Does this include fathers and parents with learning disabilities?



Further reading

Listen to Angela Frazier-Wicks MBE, Chair of the Family Rights Group Board of Trustees talking about her own experience of farewell contact with her children [here](#).

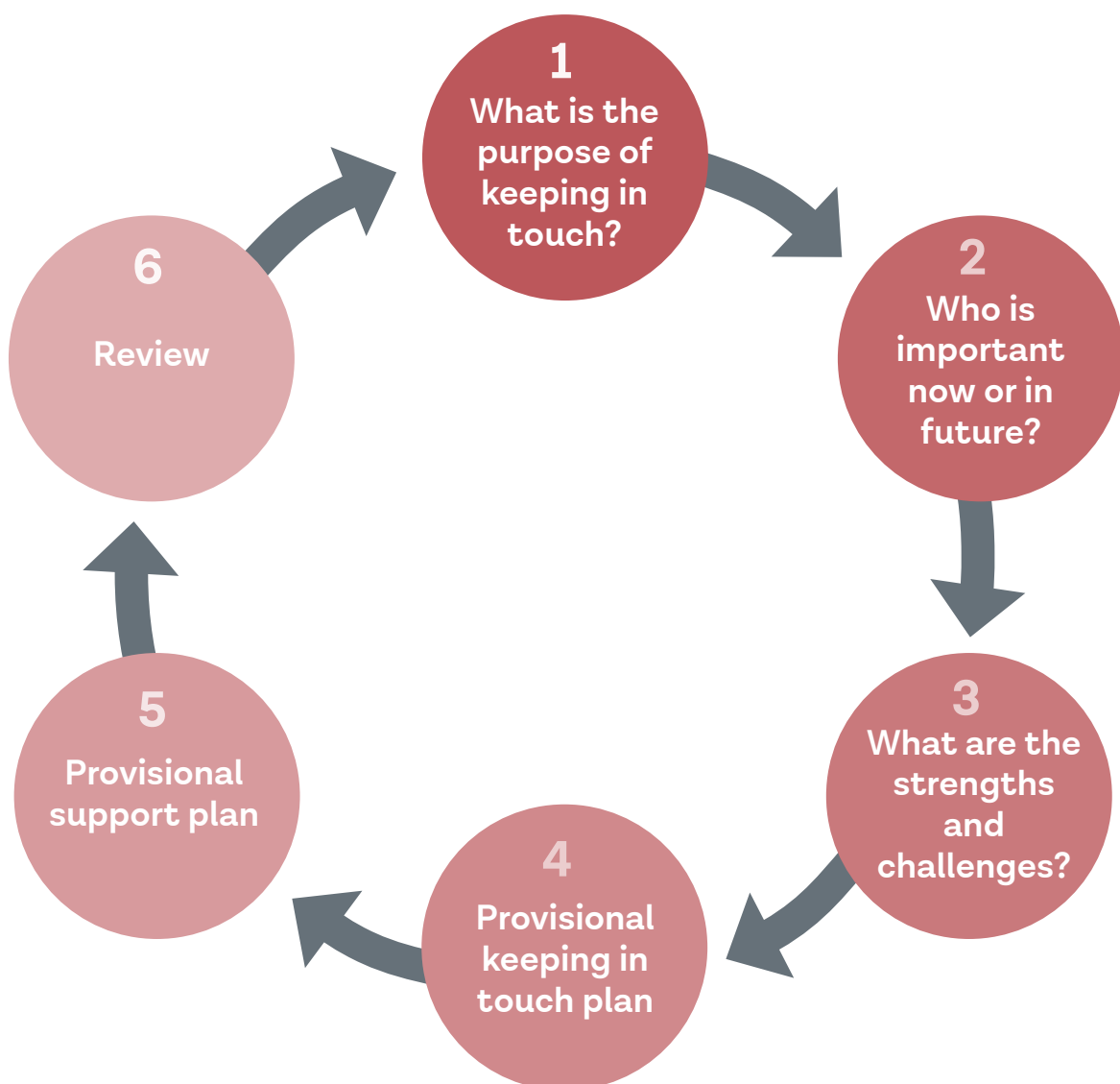
You can find more information about supporting birth parents [here](#).

Part Two: Keeping in touch and the child's journey through care

Seven step approach to planning contact

There are many common research findings around contact across placement type, but there is also specific evidence in relation to different stages in the child's journey through care and for different kinds of new families.

The **keeping in touch planning tool** summarises the most recent research with guidance to practitioners about relevant factors relating to the child, carers and birth relatives and other important people that may affect the quality of contact. Areas where support might help improve the prospects of meaningful connection are highlighted as well as the potential benefits of a variety of ways of keeping in touch.



During care proceedings

When children are first removed from home, they experience multiple losses and changes including family time supervised by strangers in an unfamiliar setting. They need support and reassurance to settle into this routine as well as high quality observation both in contact and placement to understand the meaning and impact of these visits.

Newborn babies need sufficient time to build an **attachment** to their carer and contact at a level that allows them to build a **relationship** with their parents whilst the adults work towards the necessary changes. Contact can then be increased for attachment building. High frequency, poor quality contact can be harmful to infants, particularly when it involves long car journeys (Humphreys & Kiraly, 2011).

Some studies have found that higher levels of contact are associated with an earlier return home from care, but this does not mean there is a causal link: purposeful social work intervention, strong attachments and parental commitment are all associated both with more frequent contact and successful return home (Boddy et al., 2013; Taplin & Suomi, 2020). Good quality family time is a pre-requisite for reunification but is not sufficient in itself to justify it; parents need help to address their underlying difficulties as well. Improving their time together builds good memories for parent and child and increases the prospect of positive visits in the long term if children do not return home. Family time during proceedings is a window of opportunity for intervention; the primary need at this point is for intensive practical, emotional and parenting support and relationship building or repair.



Reflective questions

- > What advice and support is offered to parents during family time where you work?
- > How do you help them to answer children's questions about why they are not at home?
- > How are recordings shared and what feedback is given?
- > What additional support is available for parents with learning disabilities?

Making and reviewing longer term plans

Whatever the age of the child, plans for keeping in touch need to be informed both by a detailed knowledge of the child and both families' circumstances, as well as consideration of the child's potential future needs in adolescence and adulthood. This means that such arrangements need to be flexible and open to review as children's needs and their family circumstances change over time.

Arrangements need to be reviewed as children get older and more able to express their views and in response to changing circumstances. For some children, informal days out and get togethers arranged and supported by their adopters or foster carers develop over time, allowing them to feel part of one extended family. For others, their need to keep in touch declines as they get older. Adolescence and early adulthood may bring renewed interest in family history and a wish to build or re-establish lost relationships for some, while others choose to pause contact during the teenage years, perhaps restarting on their own terms at a later date (Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013a, 2013b, Neil et al., 2015). Family time is crucial for those children who return to parental care (the most common pathway out of the care system in childhood); the majority of care leavers are in contact with birth families (Boddy et al., 2013).

'We are adopted adults for far more of our lives than we are adopted children.'

Adoptee quoted in Adoption Barometer (Adoption UK, 2022).



Reflective questions

- > What support is available where you work for adopted adults and other care experienced people who want to trace or re-establish connection with important people?



Further reading

Click [here](#) to read more about how children's understanding of adoption changes over time.

Keeping in touch in kinship care

Kinship carers tend to be highly committed to maintaining contact with birth parents (Ashley, 2011). Where adult relationships are positive, contact is part of everyday life. When relatives take on care of a child, the effect on family dynamics is complex. For example, parents may lose an important source of support, feel that their own worries about the carer have been ignored or find it difficult to see their child receiving care and safety that was not available to them in the family growing up. Carers may feel angry, frustrated or ashamed about the child's parent's difficulties. Relationships between kinship carers and mothers can be emotionally challenging. When there is conflict, visits can be a flashpoint and threaten children's sense of security, permanence and belonging. Carers may experience hostility, threats or even violence (Wade et al., 2014).

There is a misplaced assumption that family and friends' carers can manage their own contact arrangements, but many carers and parents alike want additional help, greater clarity about responsibility for decision making and more involvement in plans presented to the court. They also want access to review mechanisms and professionally supported visits when needed, without which poor quality contact may persist (Farmer, 2010; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013b; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2015).



Reflective questions

- > How involved are kinship carers in making plans where you work?
- > What help do you offer with reviewing plans?
- > Would professionally facilitated contact make more kinship placements possible?

Kinship UK and the **Family Rights Group** both offer independent advice and information for families and professionals.

Keeping in touch in short- and long-term foster care

When children are in care proceedings or short-term foster care, relatively frequent family time forms part of a wider plan to a) understand, build, maintain and improve family relationships and b) provide support and inform decision making about future care (including potential reunification with parents or other family members). Foster carers can help children understand the decision-making process and their own role, as well as preparing them for family time, supporting them afterwards and building positive relationships with the adults involved. This can all help to increase the child's sense of security. Their observations of the child before and after visits are key to the planning and review process. Carers can be advocates for children who need more family time or when visits are overwhelming or disruptive to routines.

Keeping in touch with foster carers after a return home or move into independence can be very positive (Farmer, 2010). It's important to remember that:

- > Old relationships do not need to be broken to allow new bonds to form. Children are capable of multiple attachments.
- > Foster carers may be primary attachment figures for very young children, often they are the first safe, nurturing adults they have encountered.
- > It does not help to build trust in a new family if loved adults disappear from children's lives, just when they need them the most.

Children and young people in long-term foster care typically have higher levels of contact than those who have been adopted, but their relationships with birth parents are often more complex. The child's needs and the purpose of contact, rather than legal status, should be the key determinant of plans – some fostered children will need less contact than some adopted children. It is important that the frequency of contact allows children to regain equilibrium between visits and be fully involved in the life of their new family.

As in adoption, good communication between adults and the involvement of carers in planning visits is helpful. Long-term foster carers can provide a secure base for children by taking them to visits and being present for some or all of the meet ups unless this would be unsafe. If this cannot happen, it is helpful for a trusted person to act as a 'bridge' (Beek & Schofield, 2004; Neil et al., 2003).

Small acts of kindness can help build relationships between parents and foster carers - helping children send birthday cards or flowers for Mother's Day, sharing photographs and news between visits or when they are paused, involving parents in decisions such as cutting a baby's hair, asking about their memories of the child as a baby or choosing clothes the parent gave them for visits.

For more information read about the Secure Base Model [here](#).



Reflective questions

- > How much training and support around family time do foster carers get where you work?
- > How is this addressed during recruitment and assessment of foster carers?
- > How involved are they in reviewing plans?

Keeping in touch in adoption

‘There should be a tailormade approach to the issue of contact for each adopted child which includes and promotes face-to-face contact with important individuals in that child’s life if it can be safely achieved and is in the child’s best interests’

(Public law working group: adoption sub-group, 2024, p. 25).

There is a clear message from the judiciary that modern adoption needs to include routine consideration of direct contact, underpinned by contact orders where appropriate, bringing practice in line with messages from research and the experiences of adopted people and their families.

Click here to read the keynote speech by President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, to the 2024 ‘Parents of Traumatized Adopted Teens Organisation’ Conference.

Social workers can worry that including direct contact in a child’s plan will limit the pool of potential adopters, but the findings from the Adoption Barometer Surveys (Adoption UK, 2022, 2023) suggest otherwise and also present a largely positive experience for those where contact has occurred:

- > 70% of prospective adopters were ‘cautiously open’ to direct contact providing it was safe. Almost all were willing to meet birth relatives.
- > 88% of adopters and 80% of adult adoptees who had participated in direct contact were glad to have done so.
- > One in five adopted children had had informal direct contact with a birth relative, which was often positive. Children initiated the contact without their adopters’ knowledge in a third of cases, sometimes leaving them at risk.
- > The impact of social media was a major factor in adopters’ support to planned contact. Many reported that a lack of support and resistance from local authorities was the main barrier to establishing and maintaining birth family relationships for children.
- > Nearly half of adopted adult respondents said they did not talk about seeing birth relatives for fear of upsetting their adopters; many also worried about birth family feelings.
- > Making the expectation of direct post adoption contact clear in recruitment, assessment and training is key, along with adequate support. Prospective adopters welcome input from families where this is working well.



Reflective questions

- > Are birth relatives allowed to tell children they love them in their letters and cards where you work?
- > If not, why?
- > Do the children who receive these letters know about this rule?

Other ways of keeping in touch

Face-to-face visits are just one way of maintaining connections; the exchange of letters and other items by post, text, email, phone and video calls and the use of digital communication systems all have a part to play. Ordinary conversations about life in their first family and looking at life story books are important too. Providing it is safe to do so, keeping everyone up to date with significant changes in both families (e.g. divorce, pregnancy, illness, a child starting to wear glasses) helps with letter writing and avoids any surprises at a later time. It also ensures that children are not put in the position of sharing new, potentially distressing, information with either of their families after visits.

Keeping in touch by letter

The one- or two-way professionally mediated exchange of letters and other items between adopters and birth parents (letterbox contact) has been the most common post adoption plan in England for many years. Letters can be reassuring and important when the exchange works well, sometimes providing a stepping stone to direct contact. But communication often diminishes over time and tends to focus on exchanging information rather than building connection. It can be hard for parents and adopters to understand restrictions or know what to write; some have poor literacy. When letters do not arrive, children feel hurt and rejected. Letterbox has become an outdated form of communication in an increasingly digital world, with no justification for its continued use as the default option in adoption (Adoption UK, 2022, 2023; Barnett-Jones, 2021; Pause 2021).

Keeping in touch online

The use of online communication expanded dramatically during the pandemic and there is growing evidence about its use.

- > Informal online communication is harder to supervise than traditional methods, although mediated systems are being developed such as 'Letter swap' (Neil et al., 2024; Iyer et al., 2020b).
- > Talking on the phone or through videocall can help maintain connection between visits or when children live far away. Online communication is best used with older children and to enhance rather than replace direct contact. Young people need help to learn to manage online communication (Iyer et al., 2020b).
- > Digital poverty or lack of confidence with technology are also barriers – particularly for older carers and people with learning disabilities (Pause, 2021).
- > Privacy, safety and emotional impact need consideration for each child; digitisation is no substitute for social work skill (Barnett-Jones, 2021).
- > When birth parents and adopters work together, online contact can be a useful step towards face-to-face contact, but it can also put children at risk, particularly when it is secret or driven by unmet contact needs. Openness and recognition of children's sense of connection to birth family is the most powerful protection (Neil et al., 2013).



Further reading

Read more about digital resources being developed by **ARCBOX** and **Letter Swap**.

Click **here** for more resources about thinking broadly and creatively to help children keep in touch.

Supporting connections

Direct and indirect contact can help children to understand their own histories and keep important relationships alive. Across placement type, these arrangements need to be embedded in a wider network of practical, financial and emotional support for everyone involved, refocussing family time services on listening, support and relationship building rather than supervision. This includes:

- > Support to plan and prepare for, pause, establish, maintain or restart contact, trace birth relatives, cope with failed or refused attempts to make connections and to understand reasons why contact ceased or was never in place, extending into adulthood.
- > Understanding of the emotional impact and meaning of loss and contact for children, carers and birth family. Support to build, repair and maintain relationships between adults and adult/child.
- > On-going training and support for family time workers, foster and kinship carers and adopters. Access to mediation, review and professionally supported family time for kinship carers where necessary.
- > Independent emotional support for birth parents from the time of removal, including fathers and parents with learning difficulties/disabilities.
- > Help with travel arrangements and costs. Homely, well-equipped venues with access to outside space, open at convenient times. Support for families when siblings are placed in different local authorities and/or placement types.
- > Regularly reviewing plans in the light of everyone's changing circumstances and the child's maturity, responses and expressed wishes – to include frequency, duration, location, who attends, support and whether there is a continuing need for supervision or other restrictions.
- > Writing contact agreements in plain English and making expectations clear – who will bring snacks? Who will tell the child off? What if the baby keeps crying? Who is called Mummy or Daddy? How will we say goodbye?
- > Supporting parents and family time workers to answer children's questions in family time and linking this to life story work.

Conclusion

This is a time of rapid change in our approach to keeping children in touch with their histories and with the important people in their lives. Whilst much of the research focusses on a particular family setting, many children experience periods of fostering, kinship care and adoption – or have siblings in different kinds of family, including some who live with birth parents. These children and both their original and new families need consistently high quality support that extends into adulthood and recognises the abiding importance of all those who have cared for or care about them, as well as the impact of loss and trauma. Building, repairing, re-establishing and maintaining these relationships with parents, siblings, extended family, friends and previous carers is key to providing a secure, loving future with a strong sense of belonging for all children, regardless of where they live or their legal status.

References

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