

# Practice Guide: Reviewing contact in adolescence

## Adolescence

- > Adolescence can be a challenging time of multiple changes - physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, and educationally. Brain changes can lead to more limited emotion regulation, impulsivity, novelty seeking and creative exploration. New capacities for logical and abstract thought and hypothetical thinking can lead young people to question the status quo and think about other ways of being.
- > Adolescents may show a strong need for autonomy, control and independence as they seek to re-evaluate and establish their own identity ('my life, my choice').
- > Adolescence is also the period of new sexual interest/desires and more intense peer interactions. Adolescents can be highly self-conscious and show a strong need to belong and fit in/feel 'normal'.
- > These changes all occur within a context of increased demands for maturity, higher expectations for academic achievement, transitions and concerns about the future.

## How adopted young people think about adoption in their teenage years is variable

- > Cognitive developments mean that teenagers are likely to seek more complex answers to their questions about adoption (especially why they were adopted) and evaluate what they have been told more critically. Some will feel able to voice these concerns/questions, others will feel loyalty conflicts, have a fear of the truth or be concerned about upsetting their adoptive parents.
- > Some adopted young people may become emotionally pre-occupied with thoughts and feelings about their birth family as they strive to establish a sense of identity and make sense of their mixed feelings towards both families. They may identify with positive aspects of birth parents and/or wonder if they will develop similar difficulties to birth relatives.
- > Teenagers may also ask deeper questions about their ethnic identity and which groups they identify with. Confusion about ethnic identity can be heightened for young people whose adoptive parents do not share this aspect of their identity.
- > It can be important for teenagers to feel autonomous and in control as they navigate their adoptive identity and relationships, whilst knowing that they can always access support (from their adoptive parents or an independent professional).
- > Young people who experienced abuse and neglect in early childhood may be dealing with the legacy of such harm during adolescence and need additional support and guidance to reach maturity.
- > Negative reactions or intrusive questions about adoption from peers can be common in mid childhood/adolescence and impact on self-esteem/feeling 'normal'.
- > Adolescents also have other pressures and demands in their life (e.g. school, exams, relationships, career options) and some young people may want to take a break from thinking about adoption to focus on these other issues.
- > As well as thinking about their identity as an adopted person, young people may be concerned about different domains of their identity such as ethnicity, sexuality, gender, occupation, political or religious beliefs, class. There are variations between young people, and across time, in terms of which aspects of identity they want to focus on.

## Can contact with birth family members help?

- > Adopted young people vary widely in how well they are getting on in adolescence. These variations tend to relate to factors such as pre-placement experiences, age at placement, and quality of adoptive family life. The presence or absence of birth family contact in adolescence seems largely unrelated to overall development in the teenage years. However, ongoing safe and meaningful contact does contribute to the young person's positive sense of adoptive identity.
- > Adoptive identity development is promoted as contact can help teenagers to understand why they were adopted by talking with birth relatives or seeing for themselves their needs and difficulties. Being able to process their thoughts and feelings in conversations with their adoptive parents is also crucial.
- > Contact that is positively facilitated and supported by adoptive parents can be a concrete and regular demonstration to teenagers that their adoptive parents support their connection to their birth family and will not be threatened or upset by questions or curiosity about their birth family/adoption.
- > Contact can help teenagers build a sense of identity through identifying likenesses to birth relatives, understanding their genetic heritage and hearing positive stories of their past.
- > Contact provides an opportunity to enjoy close relationships with birth relatives for some teenagers. It can help young people feel that they are loved and cared about by their birth family.
- > Direct contact can be emotionally challenging and it can be sad for young people to see their birth parents' problems first hand. Most young people value contact highly even if it is difficult. However, some young people may want contact to be paused due to other life pressures at this tricky time.
- > The birth parents of adopted children are a vulnerable group, a disproportionate number of whom are no longer alive by the time the child reaches adulthood. Adolescence may be the last chance for contact for some children. Missed opportunities for connection before adulthood can lead to lifelong regret and unanswered questions.
- > Contact with grandparents and other relatives may be easier/less emotional than contact with birth parents and young people can appreciate hearing different perspectives about why they were adopted and their parents' difficulties.
- > Contact can help to build closeness between teenagers and their adoptive parents through creating an atmosphere of openness, enabling a shared journey through adoption exploration and can protect the young person from the experience of searching for birth family without support.
- > Direct contact can help to alleviate adoptive parents' fears about birth relatives turning up unexpectedly or making contact online and help them to gain more insight into the difficulties of the birth parents, enabling them to answer their child's questions more fully.
- > Some young people may wish to seek contact with birth relatives for the first time at this stage or wish to change the type or frequency of contact that they are having. They may have specific questions about their adoption/birth family or wish to connect with other people such as their paternal family, siblings (including half siblings) or aunts, uncles or cousins who were previously not involved with or disengaged from contact. Teenagers are often encouraged to "wait until they are older" to explore by family contact, particularly when they're going through turbulent times. However, it is important to listen to young people's expressed needs and negotiate a supportive way forward that they feel comfortable with.
- > Unmet needs for information and contact can lead to impulsive or secret, unsupported initiation by adolescents during what is an emotionally turbulent stage.

## Helping adoptive families and birth families navigate adolescence

- > Adoptive parents should be prepared to expect their child's needs in relation to contact to change during adolescence. It is not unusual for a child who appeared dis-interested in their birth family or contact to suddenly develop an intense curiosity at this time. Young people may wonder what life would have been like with their birth family.
- > Teenagers' preoccupation with their birth family at this time can lead adoptive parents to feel threatened and unwanted. Adopters should be supported to not see this as a rejection of their role but a natural process of identity exploration and exercise of new skills in hypothetical thinking. Listening to their young person's thoughts and ideas and supporting rather than resisting their journey of self-discovery can be rewarding and bonding for parents and teens.
- > Parents of teenagers may need to be reminded of the importance of open communication. Ideally, support workers should get in touch with adoptive families at the time of the child's entry into the adolescent period, to offer information about the changes that typically occur in the teenage years and provide suggestions around raising the topic or how to answer questions that their teenager may be asking/thinking. Offers of independent support for the teenager, or to update life story books or review contact arrangements should be included.
- > Adopted young people often share that the adults around them (professionals and adoptive parents) can over-protect and hide information that they prefer to know about rather than be left to imagine and fear the worst.
- > Some teenagers may prefer the support of an independent professional to explore questions and topics without fear of upsetting their family.
- > Adopted young people usually appreciate having autonomy around and feeling trusted to communicate more directly with birth relatives themselves, but they should not feel solely responsible for managing boundaries and staying safe. They still need the support and guidance of their adoptive parents such as around privacy settings and boundaries. They may need help to think through the consequences of impulsive actions and sharing of personal information.
- > Young people want to feel that they are being listened to and that their voice is heard. Rules around contact or social media will be more acceptable if they are negotiated rather than imposed and are seen by the young person as reasonable.
- > When young people have problems in adolescence, birth parents can question whether adoption was for the best or feel guilty about their own role in the child's troubles. Birth parents may need support to work out how best to help the young person, particularly if the child's relationship with the adoptive parents is difficult at this stage. They may need support to answer challenging questions from the young person and be prepared for potential reunions.
- > Birth relatives often worry about what the child has been told about them and whether contact will continue after 18. They may hope for a reunion and/or feel anxious about this. Additional emotional support may be needed at this stage.
- > Young people having agency mediated contact (direct or letterbox) may continue to need this service after the age of 18, or require support to gradually transition to other forms of contact. Reviewing contact support plans with young people around the age of 18 is important.

- > If young people choose to take a break from direct contact in adolescence because they are finding it difficult or wish to focus on other things, birth relatives will need to be given explanations for and supported around this loss of contact and ideally provided with alternative updates about their child's welfare. Adoptive parents may find that maintaining the contact themselves without the young person (but with their permission) through adult-only meetups, calls or letters can mean that the connection and access to important information is not lost and can easily be established when the turbulent teenage period has passed.
- > Forging new connections between young people and birth relatives, including siblings, in adolescence can feel awkward and strange and support may be appreciated.

## Further reading and resources

'Voices of Adopted Teens' by PAC-UK: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAitK9N3Gxo&t=351s>

The Adoption and Fostering Podcast | A & F Conference: Dawn Harker on Podbean <https://www.podbean.com/ea/pb-kzc9v-f34101>

Staff, R., & Thornbery, H. (2016). *Parenting Adopted Teenagers : Advice for the Adolescent Years*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Coleman, J. (2014). *Why Won't my Teenager Talk to Me?* Routledge.

Singer E. (2010). The "W.I.S.E. Up!" tool: empowering adopted children to cope with questions and comments about adoption. *Pediatric Nursing*, 36(4), 209–212.

<https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/the-bullying-workbook-for-teens-activities-to-help-you-deal-with-social-aggression-and-cyberbullying-free-book/>

<https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/your-brilliant-brain-a-book-for-children-teens-about-complex-childhood-trauma/>

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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