Practice Guide: Support around digital contact and social media

Introduction

> In today's world, communication that is not directly face to face often occurs via phone calls, texting, email or online platforms and social media. This is particularly the case for young people who are more likely to have embraced the digital and online world compared to adults, and more skilled at navigating and exploiting the opportunities they can offer. Digital platforms to enable children in care/adopted children to keep in touch with birth relatives are now becoming available.

> An important role of all parents is to help children develop safe online practices and understand how things can be misrepresented in social media. Parents should regularly discuss, support and guide their children around their social media use and the boundaries and privacy settings to have in place when using online communication in all contexts.

> Parents also need to be receptive to learning from their children!

> The most common use of online communication and social media between adopted young people, adoptive parents and birth relatives is as a way of keeping in touch with people already connected to each other in the offline world; this can be a natural and easy means of communication, particularly between separated brothers and sisters and cousins.

> Digital contact can help young people to transition gradually towards reunion and independence in their relationships with birth family members.

> Some adopted young people, adoptive parents and birth relatives with little or no contact use social media to access information and photographs due to unmet needs around this information.

> Some young people use social networking websites to actively search for birth relatives with whom they have no contact or unmet needs with the intent to make contact. Similarly, birth relatives may use social media sites to search for the adopted child.

Using digital contact in a planned way - benefits

> Social media and digital communication can be a useful, informal, immediate and natural way of communicating with birth family members, especially if it takes place in the context of established relationships with the support of adoptive parents. It can help people feel more connected to each other and normalise interactions and relationships.

> Where families live far apart, online ways of staying in touch can allow for a greater frequency of contact than would be possible face to face.

> Digital communication enables families to keep a record of all correspondence.

> Digital communication can be more convenient than having to physically post items and gives people greater choice around different types of communication including more frequent short messages, images, video and audio.

> Direct communication between families reduces need for social workers administration and reduces the risk of system or postal delays or losses.

> Specialist digital exchange systems, such as Letterbox (see link at the end of this guide) or separate messaging, email or social media accounts, can help people to communicate directly and safely whilst maintaining boundaries around adoptive and birth family relationships.

> The ease of and flexibility around digital communication can help establish or maintain connections between people that might not have otherwise continued.

> Video calls or messages may be beneficial for children who are non-verbal or people with learning difficulties who do not have sufficient communication skills to speak on the phone or read and write or understand letters.

> Video calls can allow birth family members to gain more direct experience of a child's character which may be hard to capture via letter and enable interaction via games or participation in key events such as birthdays.

> Video calls or messages may be a useful bridge to initiating face-to-face contact or a reunion, appearing less threatening and intense.

> Older children and young people can appreciate having autonomy around and feeling trusted to engage in online and digital contact but should not feel solely responsible for managing boundaries and staying safe. They need to feel able to report any challenges or safeguarding concerns and know there will be support, not judgement.

Using digital contact in a planned way - challenges

> Some people struggle with online or digital communication and may need support to understand its challenges and benefits and navigate privacy settings. Some people may not have access to the appropriate technology or internet access.

> Sometimes setting boundaries or stopping online contact can cause tensions between parents or carers and young people. Clear explanations for boundaries and negotiation and compromise may be required.

> People can be fearful of security breaches.

> Some people value tangible, personalised and handwritten items and do not want to rely solely on digital communication.

> Using a digital platform for contact needs to be underpinned by all the factors that make any form of contact successful – a case-by-case approach to planning contact, trust/collaboration and mutual empathy between the adults, risk management/clear understanding of boundaries, or support.

> The immediacy of digital contact can cause challenges e.g. expecting the other person to reply immediately or to be always available.

> Younger children need a lot of support/scaffolding to use methods like video calls and adults must have realistic expectations for example about children's attention spans. It helps when video calls can be short, child friendly and activity based.

> When switching from traditional Letterbox to digital systems, people may lose access to trusted professionals such as the Letterbox coordinator. Having to work with a new organisation/new professionals can be off-putting for some.

The role of social workers when planning and supporting contact

> Take a realistic view of the risks and benefits of social media contact in each individual situation. Social media, emails or texts may be a helpful way to establish communication from the start between adults or siblings in some situations.

> Consider how limited agency resources can be diverted away from families who are able to manage contact and communicate directly, whilst still maintaining boundaries around adoptive and birth family relationships.

> Help adoptive parents to feel empowered to use/move to more natural and appropriate forms of communication that suit their growing child and their birth family members as situations change. Online games and video messages may be a particularly useful way of maintaining links between brothers and sisters who live far apart and have busy lives, or with elderly grandparents who struggle to travel.

> Offer training and support around technology that can be used in contact with reassurance around privacy settings.

> Birth relatives who are unfamiliar/unconfident with digital platforms may need in-person support to learn how to use digital platforms.

Unplanned social media contact between children/young people and birth relatives

Contact by social media is more likely to be problematic when it is driven by unmet contact needs, initiated impulsively by adolescents during an emotionally turbulent stage or hidden from adoptive parents.

> Children and young people need to feel able to seek support from their adoptive parents if they want to connect with their birth family or if their birth relatives are seeking to contact them. They are more likely to discuss their needs for information and contact with their adoptive parents if a climate of openness and acceptance of their dual family connection is established from the start.

> As children and young people grow, new questions and thoughts about their adoption can appear at any time but can be hard to talk about. By raising the topic from time to time and showing their openness to keeping in touch, adoptive parents can demonstrate that they welcome their child's questions about their past and birth family and they are not are not threatened or upset by any curiosity, questions or feelings their children may have about their birth family.

Reducing the risk of unplanned social media contact

> Include discussion and training around this topic in the assessment, training and support of adoptive parents. Help them to understand the benefits of a climate of openness, and the importance of demonstrating regular acceptance of children's ongoing thoughts, feelings and curiosity about birth relatives. Help them to understand the risks of children having unmet needs for communication and information about their birth family, or feeling that such curiosity is upsetting or disloyal to their adoptive parents.

> Be clear to all that contact plans made at the time of placement need to be regularly reviewed as children's needs change, so that children's needs are met through contact that is appropriate and natural and do not resort to secret online contact.

> Link adoptive parents into the general advice for parents about keeping children safe online as well as specialist resources.

> Think about the possibilities of future online contact for every child as part of placement planning. Not all birth relatives present a risk, every situation should be considered individually.

> Help adoptive parents keep up to date with new forms of communication, their positive features and uses, and the privacy settings that they can put in place.

> Recognise that it is not possible to entirely prevent future unexpected contact via social media, however careful families are about parental controls

> Encourage adoptive parents to talk to their child about what they would do if a birth relative got in touch before this happens.

> Ensure adoptive parents know support will be available if the child seeks out birth relatives as they get older. Encourage adoptive parents to offer support to their child if they wish for a reunion, so that they do not do this alone.

> Talk to birth relatives about why an unexpected approach online might be hard for the child, and that professional support will always be available to establish/re-establish some form of safe contact with their child/young person in a supportive way if at all possible.

> Ensure birth relatives know that professional support will be available if the child contacts them. Make clear that the birth relative will not be judged, but rather that support workers will look at how the child's need for contact or information can be met in a gentle, supported and helpful way for all involved.

Further reading and resources

Iyer, P., Albakri, M., Burridge, H., Mayer, M., & Gill, V. (2020). The effects of digital contact on children's wellbeing: Evidence from public and private law contexts. *Nuffield Family Justice Observatory*. www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/nfjo_digital_contact_rapid_evidence_review_20200521_final-3-.pdf (nuffieldfjo.org.uk)

Modernising post-adoption contact: findings from a recent consultation - Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/adoption-connections (nuffieldfjo.org.uk)

Examples of specialist digital exchange platforms
1. Letter Swap:

Homepage | Letter Swap

https://www.adoptionengland.co.uk/news/evaluation-letter-swap-project;

2. ARCBOX:

https://www.arcadoptionne.org.uk/News/arcbox-a-digital-life-story-tool-for-children-and-families;

https://www.arcadoptionne.org.uk/News/digitising-letterbox-contact-for-safe-and-secure-communication

Suggestions for improving video calls or using online games:

Grandparent-grandchildren video calls are vital during COVID-19. Here are simple ways to improve them (theconversation.com)

Keeping Connected With Video Chats_0.pdf (adoptionengland.co.uk)

Keeping Connected by Playing Online Games.pdf (adoptionengland.co.uk)

10 Simple Child and Family Friendly Online Games.pdf (adoptionengland.co.uk)

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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