

Practice Guide: Supporting face-to-face meetings between adoptive families and birth families

When face-to-face contact can work well

- > Face-to-face contact between adoptive and birth families after adoption can in many cases be easier than Letterbox and result in more quality and meaningful connections for all.
- > Face-to-face contact is most likely to benefit children when the adults involved can get on well together for the sake of the child, where any risks are effectively managed so the child is physically safe and feels safe emotionally, and where everyone involved feels the contact is meaningful and comfortable.
- > Face-to-face meet-ups can help birth relatives to stay engaged, adjust more positively to the adoption and become supportive of the adopters as the child's parents.
- > Face-to-face meet-ups with birth relatives can work well for young placed children, or children who have not lived with the adult or been abused by them. Face-to-face meet-ups for older placed children may be more complex and need more support but maintaining contact can outweigh the risks of not keeping in touch.
- > Face-to-face meet-ups with birth relatives who the child is afraid of and/or who they really do not want to see (particularly where the child has been maltreated by that person) is not recommended. Children will need other ways to come to terms with their feelings about this person.
- > Contact with extended family members such as grandparents and siblings is particularly successful and should always be considered (see the contact with siblings guides).
- > However, meets-up between adoptive and birth families are strange situations for which there are no established social rules. Meet-ups are highly personal but take place between virtual strangers often in impersonal circumstances with no chance for adults to discuss issues and get to know each other away from the child.
- > For more information on making appropriate contact plans see the [contact planning tool](#).

Preparing adoptive parents

- > Preparation of prospective adopters is important. Many adoptive parents struggle to see the value of contact over the long term. Carers of very young children in particular may need help to see the future value of maintaining links, building relationships, and understanding the importance of contact. Training should include the voices of adopted young people and adopted adults who can provide insight into the long-term benefits of keeping in touch with birth relatives, and the risks that can result from not keeping in touch.
- > Assumptions about birth relatives may need to be challenged. Prospective adopters should be helped to understand more about the experience of birth relatives around care proceedings and adoption, the challenges encountered in contact and how their feelings can change over time.
- > Terms used by the professionals such as 'risk' when referring to meet-ups and birth relatives can strongly influence adopter perceptions, as can the boundaries and rules placed around contact. Professionals need to be wary of making birth relatives appearing unsafe and relationships to be expendable if this is not the case.
- > Prospective adopters may need a safe space in which to air their worries about contact and to talk through how these worries may be addressed. It can be difficult to be fully honest during the pre-adoption/assessment period. Hearing from and being able to ask questions of other adoptive parents who have navigated successful contact in different situations can help, as can having an anonymous 'worries' box for questions and comments during sessions.
- > Adoptive parents may also need support to explain the benefits of contact to family and friends who may react negatively to the idea of face-to-face contact with birth relatives and set off fears or doubts. Leaflets designed for this purpose may help.

Birth relatives' feelings around face-to-face meetings

- > Birth relatives may feel a mixture of emotions around meet-ups including renewed loss and grief, rage, jealousy, resentment, shame, guilt, relief, reassurance and joy.
- > Birth families may struggle to understand how contact can help the child. Guilt, shame, poor self-esteem or lack of understanding can lead people to hold back in contact or feel that the child is better off without them.
- > Birth relatives often feel unsure of the rules of the situation, anxious that if they get things wrong contact may be withdrawn. This fear of overstepping boundaries or interfering in the adoptive family can be interpreted by others as disinterest in the child or contact.
- > It can be very hard to hear your child/relative call someone else 'Dad', go to a stranger for comfort, speak in a different accent or talk about experiences you cannot afford to provide.
- > It can be hard to relate to a child that you no longer know much about.
- > Saying goodbye after direct contact is difficult, especially if birth relatives have to go home alone.
- > Birth relatives often worry about what will happen when their child turns 18 or how to answer difficult questions about why they were adopted.

How to help face-to-face contact get off to a good start

- > Involve adopters, birth relatives and children in making and reviewing contact plans and support packages, so that all is tailored to individual and changing needs.
- > Make clear to all involved that plans made in court can only ever be provisional – parents are in crisis, new families are anxious, children face an important move. Set up expectations that situations and people will change, and arrangements will need to be regularly reviewed and adapted.
- > Encourage adoptive parents to think creatively and work collaboratively with the birth relatives to maintain a positive connection. There is no one right way to be an adoptive kinship network, and all need to be encouraged to find their own level of comfort in their relationships rather than follow a set of restrictive or unnecessary rules.
- > Focus on promoting good relationships between the adults involved. Children will look to the adults for reassurance around relationships and events. Tension or discomfort felt by adults may lead children to feel that the people or activity is unsafe or undesirable. Relaxed and comfortable relationships between adults will reassure the child that their dual family connection is safe and manageable.
- > Helping the relationship to get off to a good start is crucial. Set up an early meeting between birth relatives and the adoptive parents without the child present so that they can get to know each other, share feelings about the contact and resolve issues (see the practice guide on setting up early meetings).
- > Allow the adults involved time to talk about their expectations, fears and hopes before visits. Help them to talk through and understand their roles. Be mindful that there are no established social rules for this situation. Consider: How should they greet each other? What names/terms will be used for birth relatives? (Young children are often very able to manage/distinguish between two different kinds of ‘mummies’ if ‘mummy [name] is deemed appropriate). Is it OK to ask questions? Offer kisses and cuddles? Bring a present? Share good news? Bring food to share? Talk about problems or worries?
- > Acknowledge the inherent power imbalance; adoptive parents need to feel in control of the situation for the benefit of the child, but also share some of that control with birth relatives. If birth relatives feel powerless they may hold back from voicing their needs and may struggle to engage in contact leading to loss for the child.
- > Help birth relatives think about how their child may feel or act. Help them to understand how maintaining connections can help the child over their lifetime.
- > Offer post-adoption support services to birth relatives along with practical support with transport and venues, etc. Ask them who will support them after visits.
- > Peer support for birth relatives can be important. Losing a child to adoption is stigmatising and difficult to talk about with family and friends. Birth relatives may value opportunities to discuss contact and feelings around it with others who are in the same position.

Ongoing support

- > Make contact with birth relatives and adoptive parents before and after early visits to check out how they are feeling; recognise the strong emotions contact arouses.
- > Provide opportunities for an exchange of information between birth relatives and adoptive parents so that news can be shared outside of visits and people can be prepared for changes (eg. birth mother is pregnant, child now wears glasses, adoptive parents have divorced).
- > Ensure there is an avenue for adults to inform of any transport delays or last-minute issues on the day (this can be anonymous via a separate phone number or email if necessary).
- > Focus on making visits enjoyable for the child in terms of timing, venue, activity.
- > Consider whether a professional needs to go along to the meet-up on a case-by-case basis – the confidence of adoptive parents in managing meetings will be an important consideration, as well as the support needs of the birth relative. Support birth relatives and manage boundaries if necessary, so that adopters are free to support the child.
- > Where it is helpful to have a practitioner at the meet-up, they should attend in a facilitative and supportive rather than supervisory role – helping to ease conversations, facilitate play and enable smooth goodbyes. Offer emotional as well as practical support.
- > For young children, the adoptive parents should always be present and available as a secure base.
- > In some cases, interaction between the relative and child may need to be encouraged to help build relationships. In other cases, maintaining a distance and slowly building familiarity and trust, or providing reassurance as to the relative's/child's wellbeing will be sufficient.
- > Help birth relatives to think through how to answer the child's questions and develop a shared script with the adoptive parents about their difficulties, and how not being **able** to parent a child does not mean they did not **want** to parent, or did not care.
- > Set up a way for the child to tell their adoptive parents discreetly if they need time out or wish to end the meet-up prematurely. Make sure any premature departure (or missed contact) is explained to the birth relative as soon as possible, so they are not left wondering what they have done wrong.
- > For non-verbal children, pay careful attention to their non-verbal communication before, during and after visits.
- > After a meet-up, talk to everyone involved about how the visit went. Reflect on what went well, listen to, and validate feelings, discuss what could have been done differently and be prepared to review arrangements. Although the child's welfare will always be the focus, any unmet needs/discomfort in adults can lead to unsatisfactory meet-ups or disengagement/loss of contact. Even a brief check-in may be vital to nip early issues in the bud or prevent misunderstandings.
- > Sometimes visits may bring children's feelings of anxiety, sadness and loss to the surface. This can provide opportunities for feelings to be acknowledged and for children to be comforted by their adoptive parents.
- > Young children may ask for more contact than they can manage; they need time to settle between visits.

- > Sometimes visits need to be cancelled, changed or paused for various reasons. Make sure reasons for late or missed visits by the adoptive family/child are explained to the birth relative so they are not left wondering what they have done wrong. Offer other ways to update them on their child's welfare such as phone calls or adult-to-adult meet-ups. As well as providing reassurance to the birth relative, this can maintain the link and ensure visits can be re-started when wanted/appropriate.
- > If the birth relative needs to cancel or take time out of contact, they may need help to explain this to the child/young person and be facilitated to send cards/messages to let them know they are still thinking about them, and that the paused contact is not their fault.
- > A reduction in intense practitioner support may be possible if the right foundation is laid at the start, if the capacity and confidence of adoptive parents is built and trust develops. However, ensure that all know how to access support when it is needed, and get in touch from time to time to remind them of this support.
- > Facilitated adult-only meetings without the child can be important from time to time to help people talk through any issues or changing needs and feelings.
- > As the child grows, help the adults to think through how to answer new questions that they may have about their adoption and develop a shared script about 'what the judge decided'. It is important that explanations can make clear that not being **able** to parent did not mean the birth parent was **unwilling** to parent, or didn't care.
- > Build in reviews of contact as circumstances of all parties can change.
- > Prepare for adolescence. As the child grows, it is important to understand their desire for agency and choice around birth family relationships. Talk about social media contact before it happens (see the guide to reviewing contact in adolescence).
- > Peer support for birth relatives can be important. Losing a child to adoption is stigmatising and difficult to talk about with family and friends. Birth relatives may value opportunities to discuss contact and feelings around it with others who are in the same position.

Further resources to support adoptive and birth families maintaining relationships through face-to-face contact

Media resources from people with lived experience

The *Two Good Mums* podcast features Laura, the first mother, and Peggy, the adoptive mother, of their two sons. They discuss their experiences of being an extended family through adoption and how face-to-face contact has benefited them and their children.)

The resources below, which are available for download on the Adoption England website, were developed with the Research Centre for Children and Families (RCCF) at The University of Sydney and are designed to support adoptive parents and birth families in maintaining relationships with their children who have been adopted.

Resources for adoptive families

Taking the journey toward a trauma-informed approach to family time and staying in touch

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/adoptive-parents-maintaining-relationships/trauma-informed-approach-family-time-and-staying-touch>

Adopters as custodians of children's connections

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/adoptive-parents-maintaining-relationships/adopters-custodians-childrens-connections>

Understanding and responding to trauma expressions

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/adoptive-parents-maintaining-relationships/understanding-and-responding-trauma-expressions>

Words matter: Trauma sensitive language with children

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/adoptive-parents-maintaining-relationships/words-matter-trauma-sensitive-language-children>

Resources for birth relatives

Nourishing the sparks of connection whilst your child is in care

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/index.php/birth-parents-maintaining-relationships/nourishing-sparks-connection-whilst-your-child-care>

Conversation starters for children and families

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/index.php/birth-parents-maintaining-relationships/conversation-starters-children-and-families>

Being your best self when staying in touch

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/index.php/birth-parents-maintaining-relationships/being-your-best-self-when-staying-touch>

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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