Staying in touch: A planning tool for children in permanent families
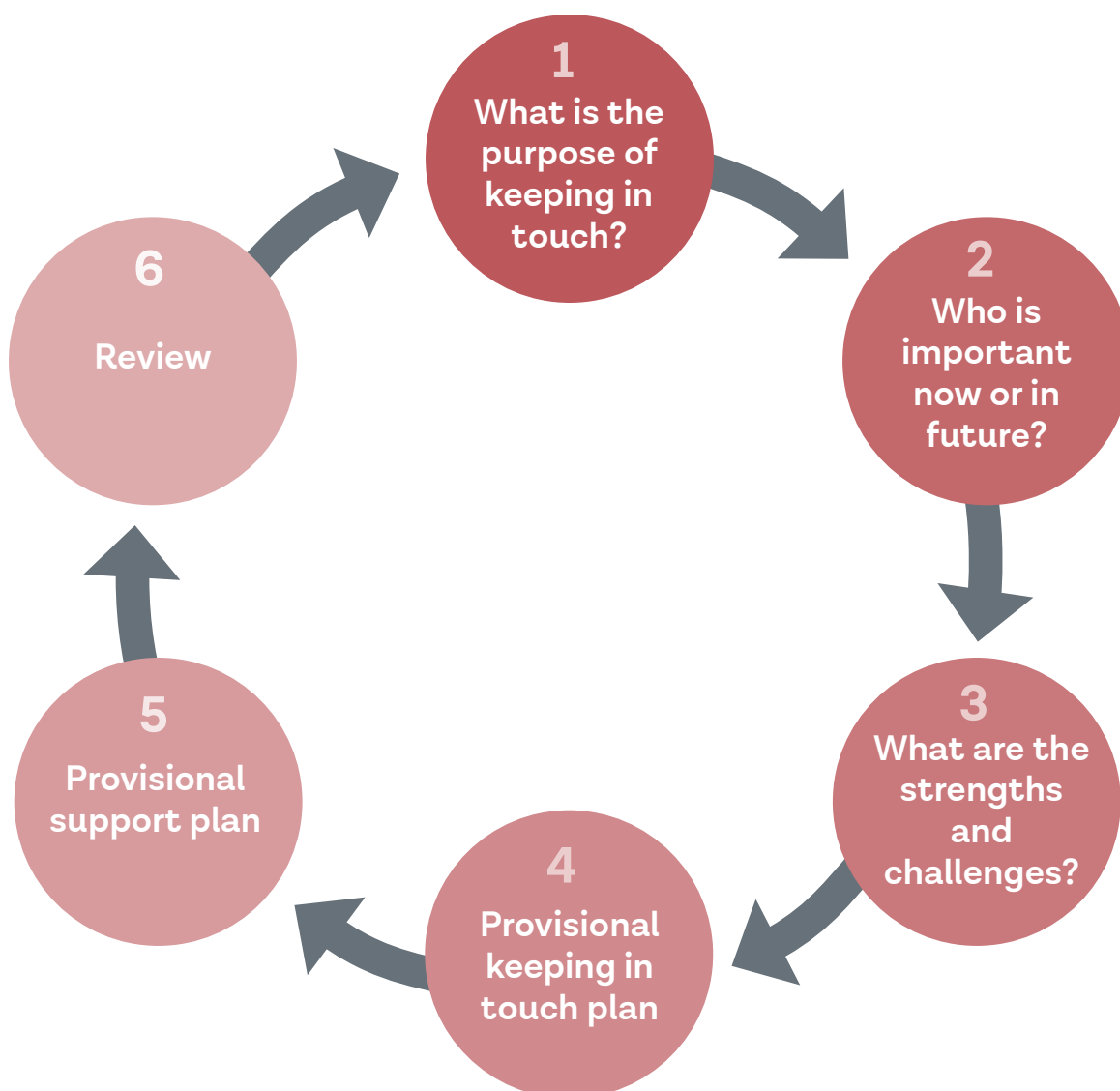
Background

This planning tool is based on the evidence in the *Research Brief: Contact: making good decisions for children in public law*, which can be accessed **here**. It has been developed with Elsbeth Neil, Mary Beek and Julie Young at the University of East Anglia. The tool comprises a six-step approach, which is outlined below.

A six-step approach

Planning for children in adoption, fostering and kinship families to keep in touch with important people from their past is a dynamic rather than linear process that needs be reviewed over time.

Clicking on each circle will take you to the relevant section.

1
What is the purpose of keeping in touch?

2
Who is important now or in future?

3
What are the strengths and challenges?

4
Provisional keeping in touch plan

5
Provisional support plan

6
Review

Keeping in touch plans are **for** children but they are **enacted** by adults and may be helped or hindered by relationships between them and the support for individuals and relationships that do (or do not) exist.

SUPPORT

Child

Important person

Adoptive parents or carers
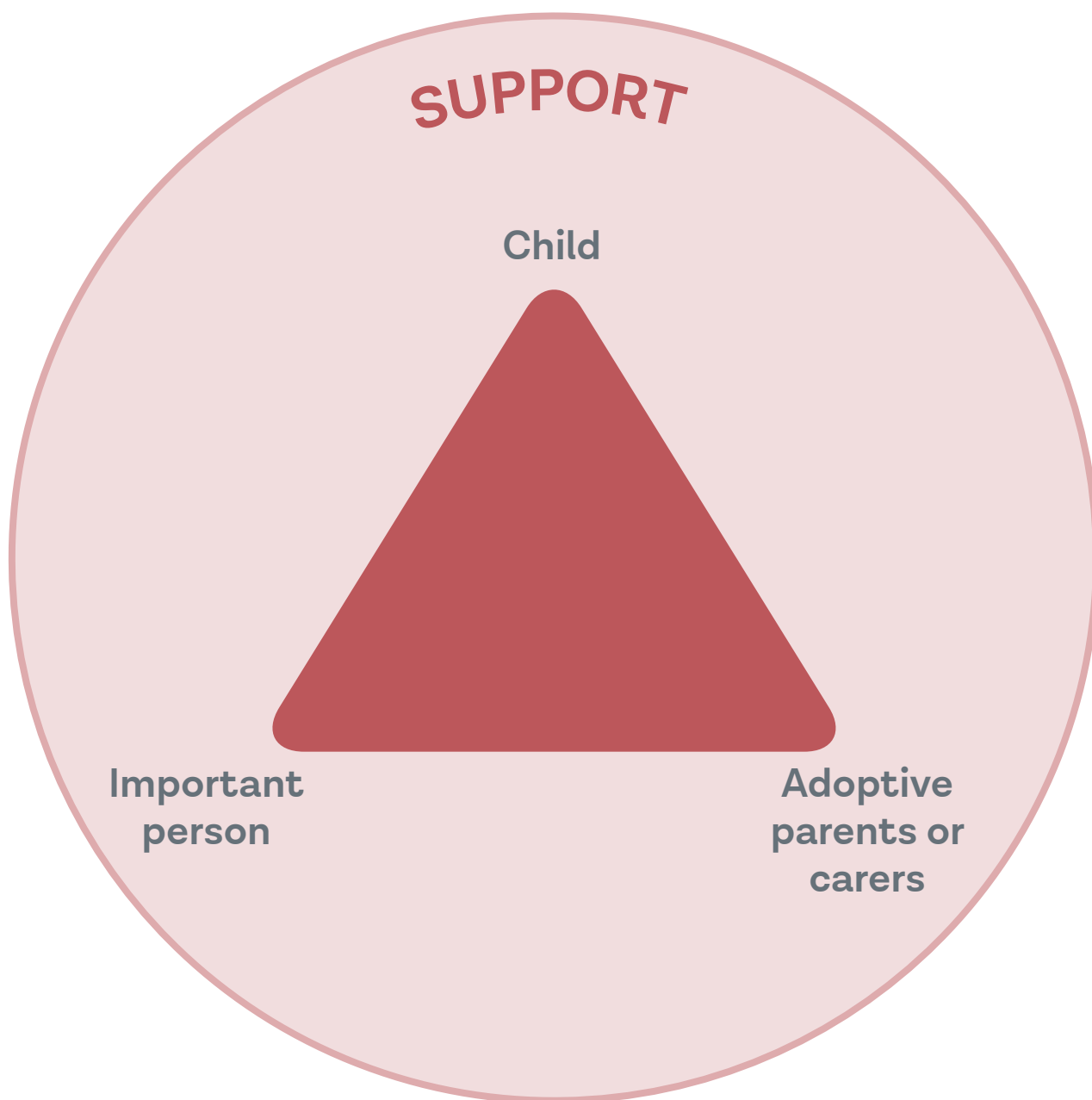
1 Step one:
What is the purpose of keeping in touch?

This may vary for different individuals in the child's life and over time. It can include:

> 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 Black, Asian and 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.

This planning tool is focused on permanent families. When long-term plans have not been decided, keeping in touch serves the additional purpose of providing an opportunity for professionals to learn more about existing family relationships and the needs of everyone involved, informing future plans for support, care and contact.

2 Step two:
Who is important to this child now? For the future?

This goes beyond immediate birth family and existing relationships and can include:

> Brothers and sisters – full siblings as well as half and stepsiblings and children with whom the child has shared a household or regards as a sibling, such as those in the same foster home. Keeping in touch with siblings is generally important and positive and can potentially be sustained at a relatively high level.
> Mothers – although this can be particularly important for children, it may be emotionally charged.
> Fathers – young people often regret a lack of information about or links with fathers/paternal family.
> Previous carers and others who have been involved in caring for the child at some point – examples might include childminders, grandparents, family friends or neighbours. Maintaining these relationships can help ease the child's loss and pain of separation.
> Other connected people who love or care about the child, want to support them into adulthood or provide a link to family history and heritage, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, neighbours, supportive professionals. This might also include some people a child has not yet met.
> Pets.

One way of thinking about who is important to a child is through the use of an ecomap. Click **here** to read more about creating an ecomap.

When there are many people in a child's life, the most important relationships may need to be prioritised for meet ups to ensure that the overall pattern of visits is not overwhelming.

3 Step three:
What are the strengths and challenges for each person involved? Their relationships with each other? What support can be offered to address any worries, keep everyone safe and build relationships?

Keeping in touch plans need to be individualised and based on a detailed understanding of this particular child and their adoptive and birth family's specific needs and circumstances. Combining this understanding with research evidence is key to making the best possible plans.

Research has identified a number of factors in the child, the birth relatives and the carers/adoptive parents that are associated with either beneficial or detrimental contact. These findings (summarised in Table 1) relate primarily to direct contact with birth parents and siblings but may also be relevant for other ways of keeping in touch and to other connected people. For a more detailed summary of the research, see *Contact: making good decisions* briefing.

Table 1 provides a summary of evidence and can be used to evaluate the strengths and challenges associated with keeping in touch with different people. It can also help to inform the search for a permanent family as well as to identify support, protection or training that might be needed.

Generally, the presence of a challenge indicates the need for additional support rather than a reason to stop visits. But if nothing changes despite appropriate help, there may be a need to pause direct contact and try other ways of keeping in touch or meet the child's identity needs through life story work or connections with other family members. Whilst every situation is different, meet ups are particularly likely to be contraindicated if a child is persistently fearful, freely adamant that they do not want to attend or if they are at risk of abuse (including continued control by an individual who may have harmed them sexually).

Table 1

Strengths and Challenges Associated with Keeping in Touch

SIBLINGS
The research base relates to siblings, but these factors are likely to be important for other children such as cousins.

Strengths associated with positive sibling contact	Challenges associated with difficult or detrimental sibling contact
Children/young people want to keep in touch. Activity based, chance to build up good memories. Carers/adopters from similar backgrounds, with similar values. New families are geographically close. **Question to reflect on:** What is the potential for these relationships to grow over time?	Child is re-traumatised or recovery impaired by contact. Siblings discourage child from loving/settling in with new family. Chains of contact present a risk. Negative patterns re-emerge (e.g. sexualised behaviour/scapegoating) during visits. Sibling cannot relinquish parental role. **Question to reflect on:** What support can be offered?

CONNECTED ADULTS

The research base relates primarily to birth relatives, but it is likely that these factors are also relevant for other connected adults.

Strengths in the child associated with positive contact with connected adults	Challenges for the child associated with difficult or disruptive contact with connected adults
Child placed in infancy.	Older child.
Absence of major behavioural/mental health problems.	Rejected child, lived with several birth relatives.
Healthy psycho-social development.	Major behavioural/mental health problems.
Child has not witnessed/does not imitate violence.	Child witnessed violence/imitates violence.
	Question to reflect on: What support can be offered?

Strengths in the adoptive parents/ carers associated with positive contact with connected adults	Challenges for the adoptive parents/carers associated with difficult or disruptive contact with connected adults
Involved in planning, trained, prepared and supported.	Excluded from planning, unsupported, unprepared, untrained.
Realistic understanding of potential risks and reasons why birth parents could not care for child.	Adopters or carers do not recognise potential risks and/or are unable to maintain boundaries to keep the child safe.
Resolved states of mind in relation to own loss/abuse.	Unresolved states of mind re own loss/attachment/abuse.
Constructive, collaborative approach.	Unwilling to work collaboratively, lack of sensitivity, empathy, reflective capacity.
Sensitivity, empathy, reflective capacity.	Little communicative openness – find it hard to think and talk about child's connection to birth family.
Communicative openness – comfortable talking and thinking about the child's connection to birth family.	**Adopters** feel plans have been imposed on them.
Adopters feel empowered to take control of, support and adapt arrangements.	**Foster carers** feel ignored or do not understand why their involvement matters.
Foster carers feel involved in keeping in touch plans and understand their contribution.	**Kinship carers** are unclear whether or how plans can be reviewed as circumstances change.
Kinship carers feel empowered to adapt arrangements and able to seek support with this.	**Question to reflect on:** What support can be offered?

Strengths in the connected adult associated with positive contact	Challenges for the connected adult associated with difficult or detrimental contact
Has never been child's primary carer or was not involved in the abuse or neglect of the child.	Seriously maltreated or traumatised child in past (includes exposure to domestic violence).
Constructive and collaborative approach.	Denies causing harm/shows no remorse/regret.
Relatively free of significant personal difficulties (e.g. substance misuse).	Exposes child to values at odds with permanent family (e.g. drug use).
Accepts harm caused to child, expresses regret/ remorse.	Significant personal difficulties (e.g. substance misuse.
Reliable and punctual.	Unreliable, persistently late.
Can support the child as a member of their adoptive/foster/kinship family.	Does not accept the child's membership of their adoptive/foster/kinship family.
	Question to reflect on:
	What support can be offered?

Relationship strengths associated with positive contact	Relationship challenges associated with difficult or detrimental contact
Adults are able to trust and respect each other, recognising the importance of the other's role in the child's life and the benefits of keeping in touch.	Adults have little trust in each other, do not recognise the other's place and importance in the child's life.
Connected adult accepts, supports and affirms new family, relinquishes parenting role in adoption or shares it appropriately in line with agreed plan in kinship or fostering. **This can change over time.**	Connected adult insists on maintaining role as main carer, discourages child from loving new family.
Child trusts their carers/adopters, feels secure in their new family and can trust the adults in their life to work together.	Adopter/carer does not recognise the benefits of keeping in touch, is critical or overwhelmingly angry towards connected adult.
Child's existing relationship with connected adult is positive, with good memories. They are not afraid and freely want contact.	Child feels insecure in permanent family, has little trust in adopters/carers, cannot trust the adults in their life to work together.
Keeping in touch can be less complex when there is no pre-existing relationship with the adult involved and potential for a safe and rewarding one to develop, particularly for children placed at a young age.	Child has troubled or traumatic relationship with this adult, has negative memories, is re-traumatised or fearful after visits, freely does not want contact.
Interactions during visits are positive and non-abusive.	Connected adult uses contact to undermine threaten or cause conflict with carers or threatens abduction.
Connected adult does not use contact to undermine/threaten or cause conflict with carers/adopters	
Question to reflect on:	**Question to reflect on:**
What is the potential for these relationships to grow over time?	What support is needed to build relationships and make sure everyone is safe?

Further messages from research about assessing the strengths and challenges for adopters, foster carers, birth relatives and children and young people can be found **here**.

4 Step four: Provisional contact plan: What is the best way of keeping in touch with this person? How will this fit in with the overall pattern of contact for this child?

Examples to consider:

> Face-to-face contact supported by adopters/carers/extended family/professionals.

> Actively facilitated face-to-face contact to improve relationships/allow child to ask questions/ prepare a young person for managing this relationship more independently as they become an adult.

> Face-to-face contact in the community/family home/activity based/family time centre.

> Online, telephone or digital contact – works best alongside or as a stepping stone to face-to-face and is easier for older children. Security, privacy and confidentiality need addressing, as well as digital poverty/lack of confidence.

> Postal exchange contact – this can be hard to sustain but useful when direct contact is not possible or for use as a stepping stone to direct contact, especially for siblings. Those involved need support, guidance and help with any literacy issues.

Frequency of contact should be in line with the benefits and purpose of keeping in touch – for example, more frequent for enjoyable contact designed to build or maintain relationships, less frequent for difficult contact for identity purposes or as a reality check. It is also important to allow the child to regain equilibrium between visits. Sibling contact can be sustained at a relatively high level.

Click **here** to read more about thinking broadly and creatively about options for keeping in touch.

5 Step five: Provisional contact support plan

Across permanent family types this could include:

> Setting up meetings between adults outside of visits to the child.
> Supervision, facilitation, mediation, hands-on parenting support, relationship building.
> Training and support for carers and family time workers.
> Links to peer support for child and adoptive parents and carers.
> Independent emotional support for birth parents from point of removal, recognition of their loss, referral to services (e.g. domestic violence and abuse support).
> Adapted support for parents with learning difficulties.
> Making adoptive parents central to discussions about keeping in touch, increasing the involvement of foster carers in meetings and discussions.
> Including kinship carers in discussions about plans for keeping in touch, providing access information, training, support, mediation, review and professionally facilitated visits when necessary.
> Involving children and families in drawing up written agreements.
> Establishing role clarity and expectations (e.g. Who is Mummy? Who checks the child's behaviour?).
> Emotional and practical support before and after visits for everyone involved.
> Financial and practical help with travel/outings.
> Help to take part in special family events (e.g. weddings).
> Homely, well-equipped venues with access to outside space, open at weekends and in the evenings.
> Help for families with writing letters and accessing online platforms; help for young people to manage online contact as they get older.
> Help to trace important people and come to terms with contact that does not happen.
> Information sharing between visits or when these are paused to keep relationships alive.
> Clarity and transparency about the decision-making process.
> Support when siblings are in different local authorities or family types.
> into adulthood for all care experienced people and their families.

Click **here** to read more about roles and responsibilities in contact planning

6 Step six: Review

This should consider everybody's point of view and current circumstances, paying particular attention to children's response before and after visits, their demeanour during contact as well as their verbally expressed wishes.

Questions to consider:

> What is the purpose of keeping in touch now?
> Who is important to this child now or who may be in future?
> Have the strengths and worries changed? Have relationships changed?
> Does frequency or duration of contact need to be increased, reduced, or paused? Does the approach to keeping in touch need to change? Made more or less formal?
> Does the support provided need to change?

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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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