

Practice Guide: Supporting birth parents with learning disabilities with contact

Birth parents with learning disabilities experience the same feelings of loss, rage, sadness, confusion, jealousy, relief and joy at seeing their children as other parents do.

Understanding the challenges

- > Parents with learning disabilities are disproportionately likely to lose their children to adoption. They may lack support and suffer additional stigma and bullying in the community.
- > They may find these feelings difficult to talk about and find contact arrangements harder to understand.
- > Parents with learning disabilities sometimes agree with what you have said even if they don't really understand it because they are embarrassed to ask you to explain. They can find it hard to remember information or understand abstract explanations; they may focus on concrete, literal thinking.
- > They may find it hard to access post-adoption support that meets their particular needs.
- > They may need extra help to understand and respond to their children as they grow up, especially when they do not see them very often.
- > Contact can be positive for adopted children, helping them to understand their identity and history and the reasons why they were adopted.
- > Support can help contact to work well.

What practitioners can do to help

- > Respect and value the role that learning disabled parents can play in adopted children's lives.
- > Model polite, patient communication and appreciation of all kinds of achievements (baking a cake as well as passing an exam).
- > Make sure that you understand the parent's particular communication needs and share this information with the post-adoption support service, the contact supervisor and the adoptive parents.
- > Work with learning disabilities services and help them understand the importance of contact.
- > Use simple language in conversation, letters and written agreements.
- > Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
- > Set out information clearly on the page and avoid jargon.
- > Don't use metaphors, sayings or similes.
- > Use simple pictures to support explanations.
- > Repeat explanations more than once.
- > Check out that you have explained properly by asking the parent to give you the explanation back in their own words.
- > Remind parents about appointments.
- > Don't just **tell** a birth parent how to do something (like play with a baby), **show** them.
- > Take an active, supportive role during contact. Tell birth parents what they are doing right, point out when the child responds well to them, help them change what they do as the child develops.
- > Encourage adoptive parents to help their child understand the birth parent's difficulties and value their positive qualities as they grow up.
- > Where contact is by letter, remind parents when their letter is due and offer them help in writing the letter.

Further reading

Burch, K., Simpson, A., Taylor, V., Bala, A. and Morgado De Queiroz, S. (2024). Babies in care proceedings: What do we know about parents with learning disabilities or difficulties? Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/babies-in-care-proceedings-what-do-we-know-about-parents-with-learning-disabilities-or-difficulties>

The Working Together with Parents Network (WTPN) 2021 update of the 2016 Good practice guidance on working with parents with a learning disability [FINAL 2021 WTPN UPDATE OF THE GPG.pdf \(bristol.ac.uk\)](#)

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.

Authors: Elsbeth Neil and Julie Young, 2024



www.researchinpractice.org.uk



ask@researchinpractice.org.uk



[@researchIP](#)

Part of the National Children's Bureau -
Registered charity No. 258825. Registered in
England and Wales No. 952717.

NCB RiP - Registered in England and Wales
No. 15336152.

Registered office: National Children's Bureau,
23 Mentmore Terrace, Hackney, London E8 3PN.
A Company Limited by Guarantee.

www.ncb.org.uk