



# MANAGING CONTACT AFTER ADOPTION STRATEGIES, SUPPORTS AND SERVICES

**When a child cannot live with their biological parents, they continue to belong to them. This isn't about ownership, rather a child being intrinsically linked to their birth family.**

Contact for adopted children is legislated and is a requirement by law. Adoptive parents are not only expected to comply with contact plans for birth families but are required to accompany the child and facilitate contact. This entails making relationships with not only the birth parents but also often the wider birth family of their adopted child. Scheduled family visits are essential to maintaining the child's sense of connectedness and identity with their biological family.

## What changes when a child is adopted?

- The adoptive parents must facilitate contact with the biological family independently, without agency support.
- Once adoption has become the permanency plan for children, contact is no longer about building close relationships with the birth family so much as a way of helping a child to understand their antecedents and develop a strong sense of identity. It is an important aspect of Life Story work.
- Given the change in purpose for contact following adoption, it generally occurs less frequently than it may have done in the past. Research suggests that the majority of adopted children see their biological family four times per year. However, this may vary based on the needs and wants of the child and is up to the discretion of the adoptive parents.
- There may be some grief and loss experienced by the biological family which may play out in contact with the child through parental behaviours such as undermining the adoptive parents.



## TIPS FOR FACILITATING CONTACT

### Considerations

#### Safety: Physical and emotional

When planning for family visits, the child's emotional and physical safety is a priority. Safety is determined through:

- Listening to the child
- Seeking alternative views and opinions
- Observation of the child's behaviour and interactions
- Understanding the impacts of trauma
- Understanding the relevant history of the child

#### Best interests of the child

Family visits should be focused on meeting the needs of the child. This will impact decisions around:

- Who is involved in the family visit
- The purpose of the family visit
- The type of family visit
- Frequency and duration of visits
- The venue and activities

#### Collaboration in planning and decision making

Research suggests that family visits are more likely to work if the family is actively involved in planning and decision making. Who to consider:

- Children
- Family
- Carers
- Psychologists and counsellors

### Preparing the child and the family

- Remain child focused
- Have photos displayed around the house of the child's birth family
- Talk positively about family members
- Include the child and family in the making of plans
- Talk about the visit - who will be attending, where it is going to be, how long they will be there and what activities may happen
- Ask scaling questions about feeling i.e. how excited are you to be seeing your mum today
- Talk about previous family visits
- Confirm with the family the day prior to the scheduled visit
- Confirm if there are any rules or boundaries in place for family time
- Create a repair ritual for after visits

### Preparing yourself

- Remain child focused
- Manage and reflect on your emotions
- Leave enough time to arrive on time
- Be attuned with the child
- Debrief afterwards if required

# COMMON PROBLEMS WITH FACILITATING CONTACT

Research shows that more than half of adoptive parents experienced problems with arranging or facilitating contact. Below is a list of some common problems experienced by adoptive parents and suggested strategies for managing them.

**Problem:** My child has so many different contacts with various family members, it feels like we are constantly going to contact.

**Strategy:** Consider whether the child needs to be seeing all family members as frequently as they are. Consider whether it would be appropriate to reduce the frequency of contact with members from the extended family or even with the birth parents. Where there is cohesion within a family, you could plan to see two family members at the same contact, for example seeing grandma and mum together.

**Problem:** The parent of the child is living a chaotic life and it's hard to make contact with them to arrange family time.

**Strategy:** Create a schedule for contact well in advance of the planned contact. If the birth parent/family member doesn't attend or cancels the contact, it is important to be open with the child in an age appropriate way that the parent has cancelled/is not available. It is not advisable to keep contact a secret until just before. Whilst you might feel that you are protecting the child from an emotional response, it is advisable to let the child have the emotional response and then help them to deal with the disappointment and grief which comes from their parent cancelling. The adoptive parent should be open with the child, in an age appropriate way, about why the child came into care in order for them to understand the reasons why their parent can't always be available for contact.

**Problem:** The birth parent/other family member comes to contact under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

**Strategy:** Be clear with the parent that it is not acceptable for them to be under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol when they are visiting with the child. It may be appropriate to call the contact off if the parent is under the influence.

**Problem:** The birth parents/family refuse to accept the adoption order is permanent and try to undermine the placement. The birth parents do things like tell the child that they will be reunited, have prepared a room for the child or try to persuade the child to run away. The birth parents/family have gone so far as to denigrate the adoptive parents.

**Strategy:** Being open with the child in an age appropriate way about the reasons that they came into care and the reasons that their parents could not look after them.

**Problem:** There are concerns for the safety and security of the child if the birth parent has my phone number or knows where I live.

**Strategy:** Consider organising contact via email or through a third party, such as a solicitor. Turn off your caller ID when phoning the birth parent/family when arranging contact via phone. Alternatively, you could put in place boundaries for contacting you via phone if you need to give the birth parents/family your phone number. Be clear about what these boundaries are, for example you can only call this number to arrange family time. In terms of safety, meeting in a neutral location where there are other people around, such as a shopping centre, can be safest.

Managing contact is complex and not without complications. It must be noted that many birth parents will continue to have the same difficulties which led to the children being in care in the first place and this can lead to them having very chaotic lives. Due to the complexity of supervising contact, it can be useful to seek counselling to help problem solve some of the difficulties that you may be having.

If you require additional support, a useful list of further supports can be found [here](#).



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