

Practice Guide: Working with birth relatives when making contact plans

The importance of birth relatives in the child's life

- > Birth families are important to most adopted children as they grow up, even if they have no conscious memories of living with them.
- > Continued contact of some kind is a unique resource for many adopted children, helping them to understand their own history, make sense of their identity and feel wanted.
- > This tool from Adoption England encourages practitioners to promote sibling connections. It reminds them of the importance of linking children to their network of significant people, so that they can go through the journey of life with strong networks and supports. **Linking Lives: Helping Siblings Living Apart to be Connected.**

Understanding birth relatives needs and wishes around the time of the adoption

- > Many birth relatives are acutely vulnerable with complex difficulties and in need of support in their own right. Parents may go on to have more children. Offering positive support at the time of the final hearing and beyond is an investment in the future.
- > Many birth families are in crisis at the time of care and adoption proceedings; they may be angry, frightened or distraught. Relatives can struggle to think clearly or manage their behaviour. They may shut down and even become suicidal. The kinds of problems that led to the child's removal may get worse at this time.
- > We all find it more difficult to absorb information when we are angry, anxious, afraid or in shock. Many parents find it hard to turn up to planned meetings or appointments at this time, fail to respond to or digest important information or take in what is happening.
- > Fathers and Black and minoritised parents can find it particularly hard to access support or may feel excluded.
- > Parents often suffer abuse and even violence in the aftermath of the removal of their children. They may be shunned by friends and family and feel intense shame and guilt. This can make it even harder to talk about what has happened and access support.
- > It is hard for families in care proceedings to work positively with children's social workers because of the adversarial nature of proceedings.
- > Support from independent agencies is highly valued; birth families want someone non-judgmental to talk to who is not involved in making decisions about their child.
- > Relatives value practical support at this time and may feel able to accept this before emotional support. Providing support with contact makes it more likely to get started well.

What practitioners can do to support birth relatives around the time of the adoption

- > Explain and then explain again, adjusting the language used.
- > Keep visiting and phoning parents and relatives even if they miss appointments.
- > Opportunities such as to hear about/meet with adopters may need to be re-offered multiple times.
- > Offer practical help such as lifts to meetings or support letter writing.
- > Help to build links between relatives and the adoption team.
- > Encourage families to make use of independent support services.
- > Make sure that other professionals (such as contact supervisors or children's guardians) know about the help that is available – people may be more willing to listen to them.
- > Make sure that support services are accessible, well publicised and that families can self-refer.
- > Focus on the long term; it may take time for a parent or relative to accept help from support services or begin to recover from the impact of the court's decision.
- > Don't make final contact plans based on relatives' responses at the time of final hearing; you may need to explain to the court that such plans can only be provisional.
- > There is often a 'gap' in contact after the placement order is made and before the first post adoption contact letter or meeting takes place. Try to ensure parents are not left wondering and worrying about their child during this highly stressful period. A settling in letter from the adopters can help, as well as updates via the social worker to reassure parents.

Additional resources:

Find local services for birth parents using the Family Rights Group interactive map:

Support and information services for birth families affected by adoption in England - Family Rights Group
(frg.org.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