

Assessing strengths and challenges of adopted children: Messages from research

Connections with birth family members can be emotionally charged and challenging for those involved. The psychological strengths and challenges of all people involved need to be considered when determining how connections should be set up, what support may be needed to ensure they get off to a positive start and that keeping in touch plans are not halted prematurely, resulting in lost opportunities.

The following factors related to adopted children have been linked to ongoing positive connections with birth family members:

- > The child is placed in infancy and/or has never lived with, or experienced maltreatment, explicit rejection or has never been traumatised by the birth family member that is being considered in this keeping in touch plan.
- > They have a benign or positive relationship with this birth family member. They have positive memories of them, are not afraid of them and may freely express wanting the contact (or may in the future).
- > They have a history of healthy psycho-social development and no major behavioural/mental health problems that may lead to keeping in touch plans being difficult for them.
- > They are securely settled within their adoptive family. They know this is their new and permanent family, and that their future within this family is secure. At the same time, they know that their adoptive parents welcome and support any interest, curiosity, feelings and emotions they wish to express around their birth family.

Maintaining connections with a birth family after adoption is likely to be more challenging if the following factors related to the child are present. This does not necessarily mean that contact should not happen and for some children and young people not having contact can be very challenging too and lead to self-initiated contact. More support is likely to be required:

- > They are an older child who has been seriously maltreated, rejected or traumatised by birth family members in the past.
- > They have a troubled or traumatic relationship with the birth family member that is being considered in this keeping in touch plan, or they have overwhelmingly negative memories of them, are re-traumatised or fearful when meeting/hearing from them. Some children who have experienced abuse from a parent/family member in the past do want to keep connections with them or have mixed emotions and memories, and all possible ways of maintaining safe, quality connections need to be creatively explored. This may include another family member or a professional or the adoptive parents meeting them and passing on information to the child or some form of indirect or digital communication which is meaningful to the child.
- > The child freely expresses that they do not want to meet/communicate with the birth family member. The child's motivation/interest/curiosity around their birth family and life story can change, and options for future communication may need to be kept open, perhaps with continued communication between adults only or another person linked to this family member.

- > The child has major behavioural/mental health problems that are likely to mean that keeping in touch plans are difficult for them.
- > They are struggling with their attachment and feelings of security in their adoptive family. They are unable to experience their adoptive parents as a 'secure base'.

The dynamics and transactions that take place when maintaining relationships in adoption

When planning contact, it must be acknowledged that the needs and feelings of children and young people are likely to change over time and also be changed by others in the adoption network.

For example, children may change after:

- > Gaining support around the trauma they experienced due to their past care.
- > Becoming settled and securely attached to their adoptive parents.
- > Slowly starting to enjoy, be reassured by, or benefit from safe, quality connections with different birth family members and seeing this continue to be fully supported by their adoptive parents.
- > Slowly building trust in, feeling supported by or getting to know new birth family members over time.
- > Feeling supported by their adoptive parents around any emotions – positive or negative – that they feel in connection to their birth family.
- > Slowly recognising, with support from adoptive parents, that they do not need to ‘choose’ between their adoptive parents and their birth family or be forced into arrangements they are not comfortable with.
- > Gaining new curiosity, questions or insight into their birth family’s difficulties and their life story as they mature and develop.
- > Gaining a deeper insight into/understanding (with the help of their adoptive parents/ professional life story work) of the complex issues which lead to their birth family’s inability to parent/be a full-time carer, despite their desire to do so.

Adoptive parents’ attitudes and behaviour towards birth family members in keeping in touch arrangements are likely to have a significant influence on how children think and behave. Adoptive parents who can demonstrate lack of fear, worry, jealousy, or defensiveness and instead show comfort around keeping in touch with the birth family will show the child that they too can be safe, supported and at ease with these connections.

What support and training can be offered?

- > The language and attitude of adoptive parents will have a significant influence on the child’s experiences. Professionals can help to model appropriate language and behaviour that demonstrates being comfortable around the child’s dual connections in all interactions with prospective adopters. Training sessions can help prospective adopters to think about their own language, attitudes and behaviour.
- > Children who initially feel highly anxious around, uncertain about or unable/reluctant to engage in keeping in touch plans that can be made safe and good quality may need to receive a high level of initial support. Regularly offering options to slowly engage in tentative and well supported communication or meetings can help them gain trust and confidence.
- > Children will regularly need support that can scaffold their understanding of the challenges their birth family experience(ed) both in the past and (if applicable) in keeping to ongoing ‘keeping in touch’ arrangements, so that the child does not feel they were/are being simply rejected.

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