

Practice Guide: Staying in touch with foster carers after adoption

Theory and research around foster care contact

- > Pre-verbal and very young children have very limited understanding of the moves they experience, and no concept of the permanence of adoption. They build trust in the adults who care for them through concrete experiences of consistent care and rely on the presence of familiar people and routines for their sense of security.
- > For children removed from home at a very young age, their foster carers may be the only family they can remember. For others, these are the first safe adults they have encountered. Abrupt moves from their foster home can cause an acute sense of loss for children and may have long-lasting damaging effects on their ability to trust adults in the future (Selwyn, Meakings & Wijedasa, 2015).
- > The **UEA Moving to Adoption practice guidance** provides a framework for thinking about a child's move to adoption, aiming to minimise the damaging effects of loss and supporting a child to build trust in their new adoptive parents. It suggests that the child should experience a gradual process of building trust in their new parent/s while at the same time being able to rely on their trusted foster carer for nurture and reassurance. After the child's move to the adoptive family, the foster carer's physical and psychological presence should decrease gradually as the child builds trust and confidence in their new family.
- > Young children can have multiple attachments. They do not need to sever ties with important adults in order to build trust in adopters, although any contact arrangements must not undermine adoptive parent/s' roles as the main psychological caring figure. Keeping in touch with foster carers after being placed with adopters can help children to settle in their new families. Continued contact with familiar people and things and maintaining reassuring routines helps children to feel safe.
- > Seeing their foster carers soon after placement can make children feel sad. However, feeling enabled to express emotions associated with loss and receiving support with grieving helps children to feel held and secure in this difficult time of change and is an opportunity to build closeness with adopters.
- > For children moving to new foster carers/kinship carers, the same principles can apply. The Care Enquiry (2013) refers to children's close relationships as 'the golden thread' that runs through their lives and suggests that continuity of relationships is essential in helping children to understand the past and construct their identity. This, along with a strong sense of belonging in their permanent family, was highlighted by the Care Enquiry as crucial to children's well-being.

Contact with foster carers in the early days of new adoptive family life

- > The UEA Moving to Adoption model recommends that the start of the child's new life in their forever family is not viewed as the ending of the child's relationship with the foster carer. It is the start of a gradual process of the child building trust in their new parents, whilst feeling supported by visits from their foster carer.
- > Ideally, the foster carers and adopters will have been supported to build trusting relationships before the move, and the foster carers will be clear that their role is no longer primary carer but to support the adopters as parents, and to encourage the child to feel that the adopters are safe and loving and that their home is a safe and enjoyable place.
- > Contact, though face-to-face meetings alongside phone calls/video calls in the early days can provide reassurance to the child that they have not been abandoned, adults do not simply disappear, and that their feelings can be expressed and supported. Acknowledging the loss of other features of the foster home – such as other children and pets – and providing opportunities to see photos of them, receive updates or meet with them again can be important.
- > Contact with foster carers should not be delayed 'to allow children to settle' (as has been common in past practice) but should be encouraged to happen immediately after the move (in the first few days), reducing gradually over time.
- > Visits should be time limited and purposeful (e.g. a cup of tea, a chat and a short play) and not involve the foster carer undertaking caregiving tasks. Some children may look to the foster carer for comfort and nurture in early meetups; a helpful response might be for the foster carer to offer a brief hug and reassurance, and then gently encourage the child to receive comfort from their adoptive parent.
- > The frequency and nature of the visits will depend on individual needs of the child, the capacities of the foster carers, geographical factors, and the relationship that has developed between the foster carers and the adopters. A child with a history of anxiety around change may need to be reassured by the physical presence of (or a call with) the foster parent every day for the first few days. An older child may be more able to hold the foster carer in mind when they are apart and feel reassured by planned online calls or video messages interspersed with occasional visits.
- > Babies cannot express their views about contact verbally, but careful observation before, during and after contact can help to inform contact plans.
- > When a child is confused or distressed by the foster carer visits, this will need to be carefully explored by the adults involved. It is important to remember that difficult feelings connected with separation and loss are wholly understandable at this stage and provide opportunities for the adopters to provide reassurance and comfort.
- > Professional support, including practical and financial support for foster carers, can be essential at this stage. Foster carers or adopters may need support with very difficult feelings around the visits for themselves or the child. If these feelings appear unmanageable, even with skilled support, it may be necessary to end the visits and instead consider a range of indirect contact options that can similarly reassure the child that the foster carer will continue to care about them and hold them in mind.

Contact after the first few weeks in their new family

- > After the first few weeks of adoptive family life, the child's trust in the adoptive parents will hopefully be developing and visits or contact with the foster carer planned beyond this point will have a different purpose and value for the child. Occasional meetups or other types of contact can provide assurance to the child that they were loved and valued in their foster home and that the foster family continue to hold them in mind and show interest in their lives.
- > Continued contact can also be important for the child's future sense of identity, providing information about their early months and years, deepening understandings of birth family members (who the foster carers may have direct and detailed knowledge of) and increasing the sense of continuity in the child's life story.
- > Children and young people who spent their early lives in care may have new questions about their life story that arise as they mature, answers to which may be lost if the connection to previous foster carers is not maintained. These questions can be very important and unique to the individual but can seem trivial or unexpected to the adults and the information may not have been recorded. Keeping in touch over the years – even via a Christmas or birthday message updating with changes in address and phone numbers – and recognising the child's right to and possible need for information as they grow is important. Opportunities to offer older young people the option to ask private questions of their previous carers in the future (without fear of appearing disloyal to their adoptive parents) may also be beneficial.

References

Beek, M., Neil, E., & Schofield, G. (2021). *Moving to Adoption: Using the UEA model to help children move from foster care to adoption*. CoramBAAF.

Selwyn, J., Meakings, S., & Wijedasa, D. (2015). *Beyond the Adoption Order: Challenges, Interventions and Adoption Disruptions*. CoramBAAF.

The Care Inquiry (2013). *Making not breaking: building relationships for our most vulnerable children*. [Making not Breaking report cover.indd \(adoptionuk.org\)](https://www.adoptionuk.org/making-not-breaking-report-cover.indd)

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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