

Assessing strengths and challenges of adopters: 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.

Communicative openness

Research has shown that communicative openness is important for positive outcomes in adoption and quality contact with birth/first family members. Communicative openness involves:

- > Empathy for the child and birth family.
- > Proactive communication with the child around adoption.
- > Being comfortable with the child's dual connection to their birth as well as their adoptive family.
- > Open to communication with the birth family.

The following qualities of adoptive parents – many related to communicative openness – have been linked to ongoing positive connections with birth family members:

- > Being trained and prepared to think about the adopted person's lifelong needs and being fully motivated to put their child's needs first.
- > Recognising, understanding, and acknowledging the complex, difficult, and changing emotions that adopted people may feel about being adopted.
- > Understanding the importance of their child valuing their birth connections and heritage, and how it can feed into their identity and self-esteem.
- > Not feeling threatened by the curiosity and feelings the child may have towards their birth family. Not seeing the child as 'belonging' to any one set of parents in a possessive sense but accepting that they can feel secure, settled and belong in their adoptive family whilst at the same time being interested in and remaining connected to their birth family.
- > Understanding that actively enabling their child to express feelings and curiosity towards their birth family will not interfere with their own close attachment to their child but is likely to add to their child's sense of being able to fully trust and feel supported in their family.
- > Recognising the benefits to their child of an inclusive family boundary created through adoption, where the child can retain safe and positive connections with whoever is important to them in both their birth and adoptive families.
- > Being ready to challenge the narratives around adoption – that adoptees should be grateful or feel 'lucky'. They acknowledge that many adoptees feel 'guilty' or disloyal for thinking about their birth family and embrace opportunities to demonstrate that all feelings and questions about their birth family and heritage are welcomed.
- > Having worked through their own loss/abuse (if any) and understanding that their adopted child can in no way be a replacement child, and that adoptive parenting is different to parenting by birth.
- > Being included in decision-making around keeping in touch plans. Being willing to consider a wide range of keeping in touch options with different members of their child's birth family, including adults from the extended family and siblings.
- > Feeling empowered and confident to take control of, support and adapt keeping in touch plans to meet the child's needs as they grow and as the birth/their own families change.
- > Being able to approach different family members with sensitivity and empathy. Having a balanced understanding of the birth family's strengths and difficulties and the reasons for the adoption. Acknowledging that birth parents rarely actively/freely choose not to parent their child but are unable to parent for a multitude of complex reasons connected to their own upbringing and difficult circumstances.
- > Having a realistic understanding of any risk to their child's safety and wellbeing and being prepared to 'think outside the box' to maintain long-term connections within any necessary boundaries. Remaining open to possibilities of change in the birth family.
- > Having a constructive, collaborative approach to dealing with issues that may arise in maintaining relationships. Being motivated to keep connections going, take account of different points of view and make things work to meet their child's long-term needs.
- > Understanding the importance of communicative openness and embracing opportunities to demonstrate to their child that they can talk and share anything about their past and birth family that they may wish to talk about, whether positive or difficult feelings.

- > Embracing opportunities that arise in contact with their child's birth family to help their child gain greater coherence around their adoption story and understand the challenges that their parents experienced.
- > Recognising that their own behaviours, reactions and communication around their child's birth family will have an effect on their child and others in the adoption kinship network (see box below).

Maintaining connections with birth family after adoption is likely to be more challenging if the following factors in the adoptive parents are present. This does not necessarily mean that contact should not happen (the risks to the child of not having contact must be recognised) but greater support is likely to be required:

- > Not having been supported or unable to consider the adopted person's lifelong needs and the complex, difficult and changing emotions that children and young people may feel about being adopted.
- > Feeling that their child does not need to think about their past or birth family as they see their child as belonging solely in their own adoptive family.
- > Taking a passive approach to talking about adoption, preferring to wait for children to voice questions, rather than raising the topic themselves. Assuming lack of expressed interest in their past/birth family equates to disinterest.
- > Being highly anxious that feelings toward or relationships their child has with their birth family will interfere with their own attachment to their child. Not being given opportunities to voice and share these anxieties in a supportive, non-judgmental environment.
- > Not being interested in meeting birth family members and/or feeling that birth family members do not deserve to maintain connections with their child as they are no longer legally part of their family.
- > Considering that any birth family member will automatically remain a risk to their child's safety and wellbeing. Not being open to considering the unique characteristics and circumstances of different members of the family.
- > Having overwhelming feelings (which may be justified) of anger towards birth family members for the harm suffered by the child, which impacts their ability to engage in contact.
- > Feeling that keeping in touch plans have been imposed upon them and remaining unhappy, unprepared or unsupported in what is expected of them.
- > If issues arise, or birth family members contravene rules around keeping in touch plans, taking this as an opportunity to end or restrict any communication.
- > Being unwilling to work collaboratively, and unable to consider other points of view and the needs and challenges experienced by the different people involved in contact.
- > Having unresolved states of mind with respect to their own background of attachment, loss and abuse.
- > Being influenced by negative attitudes from their own family and community around maintaining relationships with birth family after adoption.

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

It must be acknowledged that the needs and feelings of adoptive parents are likely to change over time, including being changed by others in the adoption network.

For example, children may change after:

- > Hearing from others (including older adopted people, other adoptive parents and birth family members with lived experiences) about the benefits of and practice around maintaining safe connections.
- > Slowly building trust in birth family members over time.
- > Meeting/interacting with birth family members in ways that help them to see the human beings behind the file/labels. Gaining an insight into the complex issues which can lead to the inability to parent or be a full-time carer to the child.
- > Hearing birth family members express acceptance of their status as parents to their child or pleasure at how well the child is doing in their care.
- > Seeing their child develop a close and secure attachment to themselves, which remains strong and evident throughout meet ups/communication with their birth family.
- > Seeing a child enjoy, be reassured by or benefit from safe, quality contact with different birth family members, including siblings.
- > Experiencing their child trying to make sense of their adoption, struggling with gaps in their life story or lack of knowledge of the birth family, or expressing curiosity, concern or worry around birth family members.

What support and training can be offered?

- > The language and attitude of professionals around maintaining relationships with birth family can set the scene for prospective adoptive parents' attitudes so this needs to be carefully thought about in all preparation, training and interactions during the adoption process.
- > Adoptive parents who initially feel anxious, uncertain and reluctant to engage in keeping in touch plans can be helped to engage in tentative and well supported plans to help them gain trust and confidence in those connections and feel more empowered and motivated to move forward in maintaining connections themselves.
- > Adoptive parents may need to be supported around how to explain difficult or challenging behaviours of birth parents to their child (including lack of response to letters or failing to turn up to a meeting). They may need to be helped to see difficult experiences as opportunities to explain the challenges experienced by their birth parents and why they struggled/were unable to parent, so the child does not feel they were 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.

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No. 15336152.

Registered office: National Children's Bureau,
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