

Practice Guide: Letterbox contact

- > This guide covers key points from research and tips for practice across age ranges.
- > See also the practice guide on digital communication.

Introduction

- > Letter contact between adoptive parents and birth parents can be a meaningful and valuable part of an adopted child's life. However, it should not be viewed as an easy option.
- > Birth relatives and adoptive parents are likely to need support to start and sustain an exchange. Writing a letter is an unfamiliar task for many parents who have grown up in a digital world. Written material received from someone not really known can be easily mis-understood as intentions, meaning and context cannot be checked out or explained and each other's reactions to the material are not observed.
- > Successful two-way letter exchange can help adopted children maintain a connection to their birth family, provide a sense of continuity, and can answer many questions the child might have about their identity. However, managing this type of contact requires sensitivity, respect, and careful focus of the child's long-term interests. It is important to remember that every family is different and what works for one will not work for all.

Understanding the purpose of letter contact

- > It is important that all involved understand the purpose of contact and the long-term benefits that can result, so that all parties remain motivated to work through difficulties.
- > When birth family members and the adoptive family (including the child/young person) are able to engage positively in letter contact, it can help to keep the birth family 'alive' in the adoptive family, help children to develop a realistic picture of their birth family, answer their questions and reassure them that they have not been forgotten.
- > Knowing that there is an open line of communication can be crucial for adopted young people's identity formation, providing an opportunity to ask questions about their past and understand where they come from and why they were adopted. It can help them make informed decisions about potential future meetings.
- > Letters received from birth family members can help adoptive parents to empathise with and understand the birth family, providing a sense of the person behind the labels and facts presented in files.
- > Letterbox contact can be an important and regular trigger for conversations about children's thoughts and feelings about their birth families as they grow up, supporting communicative openness. It can demonstrate to children and young people that it is natural to be curious around adoption and birth family, and that their adoptive parents want to support this.
- > Letters may stir up difficult feelings about adoption, but at the same time can make it easier for children to voice and process their feelings together with their adoptive parents and ask questions.
- > Birth relatives often appreciate receiving updates about the child's well-being, development, and achievements. It reassures them that the child is doing OK, reducing anxiety and uncertainty. Receiving thoughtful and personal letters from the adoptive family can also provide reassurance that the adoptive parents are caring people who will do their best for their child.
- > Participating in the exchange can give birth relatives hope that their letters reduce the child's sense of rejection. Birth relatives often value opportunities to seek likenesses in the child.
- > Positive letter contact can build a foundation for a gradual, supported transition to successful face-to-face contact as some young people get older. Knowing that their parents and professionals have supported letter contact can help young people to be open and communicative about their needs for increased contact or information and seek support, rather than initiating this in secret.
- > If/when future meetings or reunions occur, the letters can help people to feel less like strangers to each other and provide a basis for relationship building.

Challenges of letter contact

- > Indirect contact via letters is sometimes seen as the default plan for adopted children, but it is not an easy option and tends to decline over time.
- > Some adoptive parents withdraw because they find it too emotionally demanding, are unhappy with the birth relative's reply or do not receive replies.
- > When letterbox contact stops or falters, everybody involved can be left feeling anxious, rejected or fearful that they have done something wrong. It can cause huge worry to birth relatives. Children can feel rejected and hurt.
- > Most indirect contact that falters does so early on and is very difficult to re-start, meaning that opportunities to stay in touch can be irretrievably lost.
- > There are no established social rules for birth relatives to write to a stranger who is caring for their child or, in the case of adoptive parents, the biological parent of the child.
- > When people have not met, or have met only briefly, exchanging letters can feel like writing to strangers, with little sense of what is wanted in letters and how they are received.
- > Adoptive parents often find it hard to know what information to include about their child and family and what to call themselves. They may be worried about mentioning holidays and other treats in case this seems insensitive to birth relatives on limited incomes. They may worry that too much personal detail about the child's life may be upsetting/re-traumatising. It can also be hard to talk about difficulties the adoptive family are experiencing such as divorce, or problems the child may be having.
- > Birth relatives can also find it difficult to know what to put in the letters and what to leave out, particularly when their lives are hard or there are important changes (like having another baby) which they fear will upset the child.
- > Even if they have positive news, birth relatives can struggle with not knowing if this will confuse or unsettle the child.
- > Birth relatives sometimes worry that the letters they receive do not tell the full story, or struggle to trust that their child is really doing OK.
- > Young people can find it strange reading letters from people that they do not know. It can be hard to think of them as 'real' people.
- > Letters may bring up complex feelings for children/young people, for example they may feel hurt when birth parents write about caring for pets or other children, or doing well in their lives.
- > Young people may object to personal information being shared as they get older.
- > Everyone involved can be uncertain about if, how and when to end the exchange as the young person becomes an adult.
- > Getting/sending a letter just once a year can feel overwhelming. People may have to wait a long time to receive answers to any questions, and opportunities to share news close to the event are lost.
- > Overall letters can present a superficial picture that fails to bring the child/adoptive parents/birth relative to 'life' and can feel dissatisfying.
- > Unreliable or unsatisfactory letterbox contact can prompt some young people to seek direct contact in the hope of getting their questions answered or finding out more. Direct contact in these circumstances, especially if done without support, tends to be more mixed.

What support needs to be in place?

For birth family members

- > Parents with poor literacy or English as a second language may need particular help. However, there is a fine balance between supporting birth relatives to write a positive letter and presenting a misleading picture of who they actually are. Young people value genuine portrayals that bring people to life and help them to understand their difficulties. Audio recordings, art work and photographs can be a substitute or addition to written letters.
- > Parents with learning disabilities may need prompts to remember what has happened in their lives over the last six months or a year, and support to understand what is appropriate for their child's developmental stage and their role as 'first' parent.
- > Birth parents may respond to a final decision about their child with a period of crisis in which the problems that led to the child's removal get worse. Anger, denial and withdrawal and an inability to take in information are common responses to the loss of their child and can impact on their ability to engage positively in letter exchange. Support to engage in letter exchange may need to be offered periodically.
- > It can be difficult for birth parents to hear about the problems their child may have. They can question whether adoption was for the best or feel guilty about their own role in the child's troubles. Birth parents may need support to work out how best to respond.
- > Some birth relatives, especially those with low self-esteem or left demoralised after difficult court proceedings, can struggle to understand that their letters are wanted or that young people will value hearing about them and their lives. They may need support and encouragement to write. Videos from older adopted people talking about the importance of knowing their birth family, or letters of adoptive parents referring to discussions they have with their child can be beneficial.
- > Grandparents or other birth relatives may have more stability and be in a better position to act as a point of contact. Even if they do not have an established relationship with the child, even distant extended family members can be important for the young person. Keeping a link to both sides of their birth family can be crucial for a young person's identity needs in the future, and extended family members may need support to understand this important role.

For adoptive parents

- > Adoptive parents may need support to understand the challenges birth parents experience around letter writing, the impact of care proceedings and the loss of their child. Talks and videos from birth parents in preparation and training are important.
- > Adoptive parents will need to be prepared for and supported around early difficult letters, letters that struggle to keep to the 'rules' or a lack of response from birth relatives. Keeping the door open can be vital. With time and support birth parents may become more accepting of adoption and more able to manage positive letterbox contact.
- > Parents with chaotic, transient lives and multiple difficulties may particularly find letterbox contact hard to sustain over the years. Adoptive parents and children will cope with a lack of a response more positively if they are helped to understand the reasons for this. Understanding the complexity of birth relatives lives and how much they may rely on the letters for reassurance may help adoptive parents to continue to send letters even if they do not receive a reply.
- > Adoptive parents may need help to explain to their child the possible reasons for missed letters and how difficulties responding via letter does not mean the parent doesn't care.

Supporting relationships

- > Setting up an introductory meeting between adopters and birth parents without the child has been shown to help both sides to understand each other and to build a relationship that will make letterbox contact easier (see guide on setting up introductory meetings).
- > Practice experience suggests that it can help to build trust and engagement if adoptive parents write to birth parents to thank them after this meeting and send a settling in letter shortly after placement.
- > Sometimes the restrictions on letter contact, set by the agency, can stifle the inclusion of content that feels meaningful and personal. Letters can be delayed because of administrative challenges in the agency, and those involved often do not know the 'progress' of their letter through the system (e.g. has it been received by the other party yet?). Adoptive parents and birth relatives may be left wondering what is happening with the letters.
- > The role of the agency in supporting letter contact should be considered on a case-by-case basis, taking a realistic account of risk. Not all contact needs to be mediated. Some people may feel able to send letters directly or use emails (which can be anonymous with addresses and full names undisclosed) especially as trust develops between parties. This can avoid letters being delayed/lost and enable more flexible contact that is responsive to individual and changing needs.
- > Many letters will need to be mediated to preserve the confidentiality of the adoptive family, but letters will not necessarily need to be opened and checked by the agency as adoptive parents may feel confident in checking the content of letters are suitable for children.
- > At the same time mediation/support should be available when required. Sometimes a short intervention by a support worker can help each party understand each other and avoid negative or resentful feelings.

Involving the child

- > Letterbox contact tends to work best when it becomes an accepted part of adoptive family life, with parents sitting down together with the child, talking about birth relatives, and sharing thoughts and feelings.
- > Even when children are too young to understand letterbox contact or appear disinterested it can still be important to keep offering opportunities to read letters, write or send drawings and talk about the letters. This avoids dilemmas about how and when to tell the child when they are older and ensures children grow up feeling that they 'always knew'. It also demonstrates to children discussion of adoption and birth family is welcomed.
- > Young people's interest in their adoption/birth family can suddenly change and they do not always make this known to their parents for fear of upsetting them. Knowing where letters are kept and being offered regular opportunities to respond can help young people to engage when they are ready and at their pace without making it a 'big deal' for them.
- > Letterbox contact needs to be reviewed as children get older and their needs change (see Practice guide: Reviewing contact in adolescence).
- > As children get older, they may want more say about what information is shared in letters about them. They may appreciate more autonomy and control in contact or wish to transition to more familiar forms of communication such as digital or social media. Negotiation and compromise is important, with guidance around privacy settings and boundaries. They may need help to think through the consequences of impulsive actions and sharing of personal information.
- > Some young people want to take a break from contact of any kind during adolescence whilst they focus on other things; parents can still maintain the exchange between themselves to keep the connection open for the future.
- > Ongoing support may still be needed in early adulthood as young people take more control of contact arrangements for themselves.

Further reading and resources

[It's Time to Deliver on letterbox contact - Pause – Creating Space for Change](#)

[Women Centre - Threads of Connection](#)

[Mothers Apart – Common Threads Collective | WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees](#)

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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