

Assessing strengths and challenges of birth/first family members: Messages from research

Connections with birth family members can be emotionally charged and challenging. 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.

Qualities of birth/first family members linked to ongoing positive connections with the child and their adoptive family:

- > Being fully motivated to put the child's needs first. Accepting that, above all, their child needs to feel secure, settled and that they belong in their adoptive family.
- > Affirming the adoptive parents as the child's new parents, or at least not using contact to undermine/threaten or cause conflict with the adoptive parents.
- > Showing acceptance that harm was caused (or likely to be caused) to the child and expressing regret/remorse (if applicable).
- > A history of a safe, neutral or positive relationship with the child. Never having been the child's primary carer or never having been directly responsible for behaviour that may re-traumatise the child.
- > Remaining relatively free of significant personal difficulties (e.g. substance misuse, severe depression, anger issues) and able to relate to or communicate with the child in a safe, positive, non-abusive way.
- > Being included in decision-making around keeping in touch plans, and able to be realistic about what they may be able to manage. Not feeling pressurised to accept plans that they feel are beyond their capabilities. Being willing to consider a wide range of keeping in touch options that will work for the best of the child and their adoptive family, as well as fit with their own strengths and difficulties.
- > Having the capacity to be reliable and punctual or able to set realistic expectations/send messages (perhaps via a support worker) when they are unable to make planned arrangements due to ongoing illness or other difficulties.
- > Understanding that their child needs to feel positive about their birth connections and heritage as this can feed into their identity and self-esteem.
- > Recognising that their child needs to understand their adoption story and the challenges that their birth parents experienced. Being able to offer reassurance that it was not the child's fault.
- > Being able to acknowledge the purpose and importance of keeping in touch over time, as the child is likely to have periods where they are interested in, have questions around or wish to remain connected to their birth family. Understanding that this interest/desire is likely to change over time and being prepared for the complex, difficult and changing emotions that the child may feel about keeping in touch with them.
- > Having a constructive, collaborative approach to dealing with difficulties that may arise in maintaining relationships with the child and their adoptive family.
- > Being motivated to keep connections going, take account of different points of view and make things work to meet the child's long terms needs.
- > Being able (and knowing how) to seek help and support when they are struggling with keeping in touch arrangements, understanding the loss and rejection that their child may feel if there is no explanation for communication not occurring/ending.
- > Recognising that their own behaviours, reactions and communication around their child and their adoptive family will influence the child and others in the adoption kinship network (see box below).

Maintaining connections with their child and their adoptive family after adoption is likely to be more challenging if the following factors in the birth/first family members are present. This does not necessarily mean that there should be no contact at all (the risks to the child of not having contact must be recognised) but all arrangements should be planned carefully and greater support provided:

- > The birth/first family member has seriously maltreated or traumatised the child in the past.
- > The child has a troubled or traumatic relationship with the birth/first family member, has overwhelmingly negative memories, is re-traumatised or fearful when meeting/hearing from them, freely does not want to meet/engage in communication with them.
- > They deny that harm was caused (or likely to have been caused) to the child or are unable to express regret/remorse for this harm.
- > They are unable to put the child's needs first. They cannot accept that above all, the child needs to feel secure, settled and attached to their adoptive family. They seek to undermine their child's security and sense of permanently belonging in their adoptive family. They may send the child implicit or explicit messages that they are seeking their return to their care, or that they are not as fully loved by their adoptive parents as by their birth family, or that they 'really' belong to their birth family or would have been better off if they remained with their birth family.
- > The birth/first family member is unable to be reliable, are persistently late or drop out of keeping in touch arrangements with no explanation/prior warning.
- > They expose the child to unsafe behaviour (e.g. drug use, criminal behaviour).
- > They have not been supported or are unable to consider the child's lifelong needs and the complex, difficult and changing emotions that they may feel about being adopted.
- > They feel the keeping in touch plan has been imposed upon them, and feel unhappy, unprepared, unsupported or unable to participate in what is expected of them.
- > They are unwilling to work collaboratively and are unable to consider different points of view and the needs and challenges experienced by the different people involved in the keeping in touch arrangements.
- > They have overwhelming feelings of anger/blame towards the adoptive parents (or support workers/contact facilitators), which impacts their ability to engage in the arrangements.
- > They are not interested in meeting or talking to the adoptive parents, feeling they are not relevant to their own connection to the child.
- > They are influenced by unsafe or dangerous members of their own family or community and are likely to disclose information that may put the child or the adoptive parents in danger.

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 birth/first family members are likely to change over time, and change, or be changed by, others in the adoption network. This might occur if: they are supported around the difficulties which led to the child's removal; they work through grief, anger and other difficult emotions experienced around the loss of the child and; by seeing the child develop and thrive in their adoptive family. They may also change as they engage in interactions with their child's adoptive family, and experience their very different, but ongoing, role in the child's life. The adoptive parents' attitudes and behaviour towards them in keeping in touch arrangements are likely to have a significant influence in how they in turn think and behave.

For example, birth/first family members may change after:

- > Meeting the child's adoptive parents and seeing for themselves that the adoptive parents are highly motivated to be the best parents they can for the child.
- > Seeing or hearing about the child thriving as they develop a close and secure attachment to their adoptive parents.
- > The adoptive parents express an interest in them as individuals and attempt to gain a holistic understanding of the birth/first family and insight into their strengths and positive qualities.
- > The adoptive parents' have insight into the complex issues that lead to the birth/first family's inability to parent/be a full-time carer of the child, despite their desire to do so.
- > Hearing the adoptive parents' acceptance of birth/first family as having an important ongoing role in the child's life, for example making clear that they will always be talked about and acknowledged as important as the child grows.
- > Witnessing the child's interest in their life story and birth family, or expressing curiosity around birth/first family members, and seeing that this curiosity and interest is not inhibited in their adoptive family life. Seeing the child enjoy, be reassured by, or benefit from safe, quality connections with different birth family members, and seeing this encouraged/welcomed by the adoptive family.
- > Slowly building trust in, feeling acknowledged and supported by or getting to know the adoptive family over time.
- > Hearing from others – including older adopted people, other adoptive families and birth family members with lived experiences – about the benefits of and practice around maintaining safe connections.

What support can be offered?

- > The language and attitude of professionals around the importance of ongoing relationships between the child and their birth family can set the scene for birth family attitudes, so this needs to be carefully thought about in all interactions with the birth/first family from the point of removal and family conferences and throughout the adoption process.
- > Birth/first family members who initially struggle to understand, feel uncertain about or unable/reluctant to engage in keeping in touch plans may need to receive a high level of initial support and be helped to engage in tentative and well supported communication or adult to adult meetings to help them gain trust and confidence in maintaining connections. Gradually they may feel able to move forward in maintaining connections themselves.
- > Birth/first family members may need assistance to explain the challenges they experienced both in the past and (if applicable) in ongoing keeping in touch arrangements so that the child does not feel they were/are being 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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