

contact after adoption

Planning and supporting birth family contact
for adopted children

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What do adopted children need?

- Security, love and to 'belong' in their new family
- Knowledge of their birth family, their personal history and 'why' they needed to be adopted
- To manage feelings of loss and separation
- To make sense of being in more than one family
- To recover from early harm

Some research on adoption at UEA

- The 'contact after adoption' study (2015)– 18 year longitudinal study of adopters, adopted children/young people and birth relatives
- The 'supporting direct contact' study (2011): focussed on agency mediated direct contact: involved agencies, adopters and birth relatives
- The Yorkshire & Humberside survey of adoptive families (online questionnaire 330 adoptive families – 2017)

Adoption of children in England

- Compulsory adoption when court thresholds are met – but one of a range of permanence options.
- About 4,600 children from care are adopted; most (75%) are under age 5.
- Small numbers of intercountry and relinquished children adopted.
- Contact with birth family neither promoted nor restricted in policy
- Practice issues: levels of direct contact very low – contact plans ‘cut and pasted’; problems with quality of contact; adopter and professional ambivalence
- Services to support contact & birth relatives must be provided

Some international comparisons

- Northern Ireland – 81% of adopters (n=93) said their child had direct contact (McDonald, 2017)
- New South Wales – model of open adoption – ‘permanency with lifelong family connections’
- Germany - Adoption law strongly discourages openness, but one third of adopters said they have direct contact (DJI, 2018).
- USA – contact more likely in private than foster care adoptions, despite fact that foster children more likely to have lived at home (Faulkner and Madden , 2012)

Contact: respecting children's links to birth and adoptive families

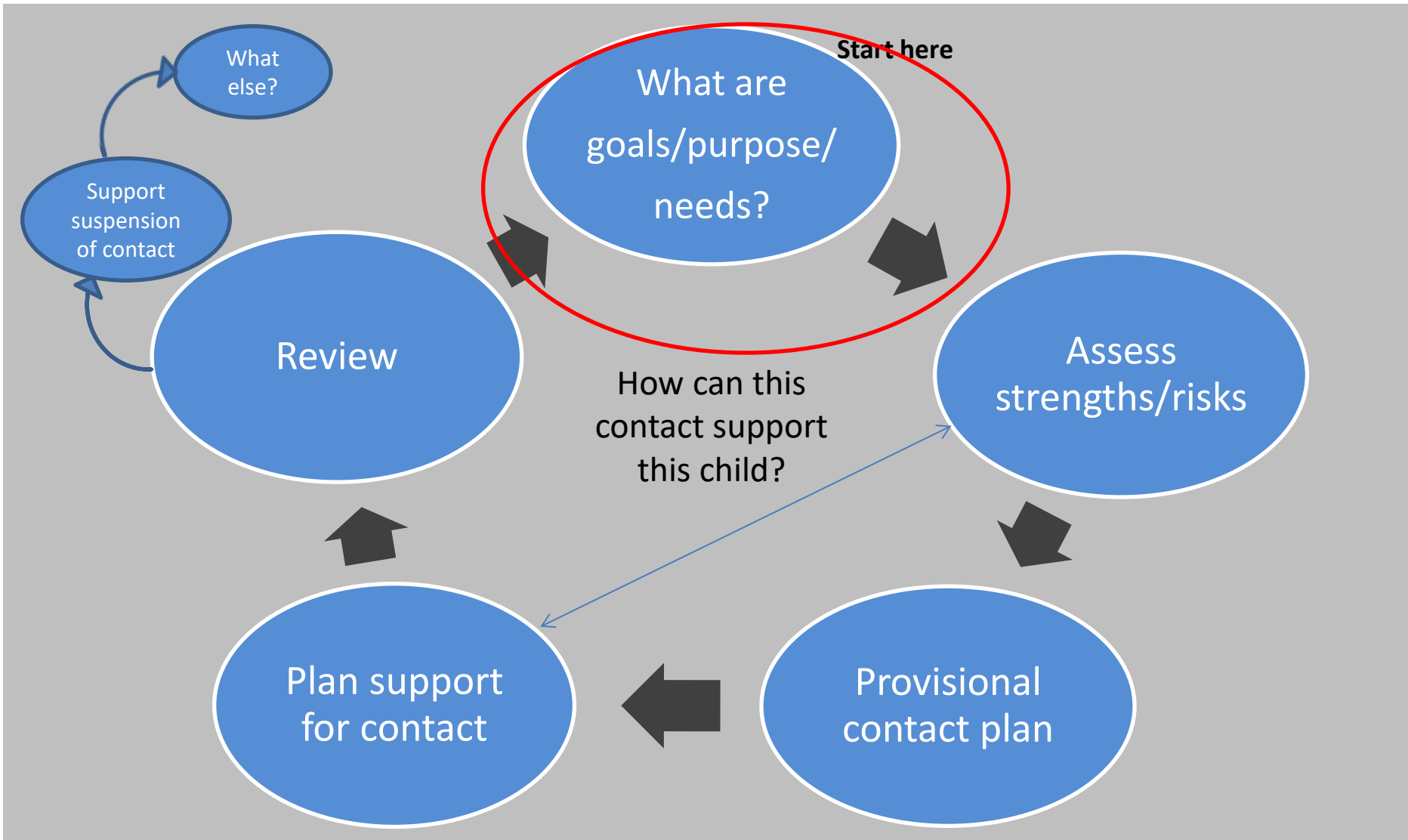
Every family is different

Contact works when relationships work

Support must be available

Every family is
different

Practice model: contact in permanent placements



Key findings: impact of contact on children

- Overall development of child determined by other factors more than by contact
- Identity development assisted by contact, but openness of adopters vitally important
- The balance of benefits and challenges varies from case-to-case and over time

Contact pathways over time (Neil et al, 2015)

- Many contact arrangements 'fell by the wayside'
 - 1/3 of YP had lost all contact by age 18
- Contact with *parents* least enduring
- Indirect contact less enduring than face-to-face
- Reductions often driven by wishes of adopters or child; some birth relatives had died
- Some increases in contact in adolescence inc. though social media

Potential benefits of contact for adoptees

- Finding out about their birth family – It's nice to be able to see her and have a complete picture of her ...[What I've got out of contact is] knowing who she is and what she was like, rather than thinking 'she could be like this' - it's like you can have this whole little fantasy world ..and once you see her, you know it's not going to happen
- Promoting communication with adoptive parents
- Maintaining important relationships

Challenges of contact for adopted young people

Emotional strain

Managing loss

Unanswered questions

Young people's satisfaction with openness (Neil et al, 2015)

- Satisfaction with contact varied within all levels openness; it was associated with contact quality/stability more than type
- Dissatisfaction often associated with gaps in contact
- Most saw some benefits in having contact and argued that the option should be there:

“Even if the contact is only brief... I think social workers should ensure that the option of staying in contact is always left open”

Assessing strengths & risks: children

Relationship history

Nature of current relationship with birth relative

Wishes & feelings

Age & development

Potential benefits for adoptive parents

- Understanding/learning about birth family
- Helping them communicate with their child
- Managing anxieties: *"For me, a mother popping up out of the blue would feel very threatening...I don't have that threat because we already have that relationship with her."*
- Bringing them closer to their child: *"I think it actually makes them feel more part of our family... Every contact we come away feeling more secure really...more certain that they need us as parents and that they are our children"*

Potential benefits for birth relatives

- Reassurance about the child mitigates feelings of loss and guilt: *“I know she is very happy where she is and that makes me happy”*
- Being about to still contribute something to the child: *“The children need this contact...to help them adjust to what has happened in their lives...we feel they just need the reassurance of knowing that their birth family is still there and care about them”*
- Maintaining a valued relationship: *“I just enjoy every moment, every time I see them...I love having contact”*

Contact works
when
relationships work

Contact involves complex feelings & interpersonal dynamics

- The nature of contact meetings may not be comfortable or 'family like': *"Maybe if I went to their house it might be different. I'd probably get to know them better."* (birth grandparent)
- Everyone's emotions can be running high: *"I get anxious about it... it's probably the fact that it is reiterating that I'm not his birth mum. (adoptive mother)"*
- Relationships are both intimate and distant: *"I still feel like they think they know me and I don't feel like I know them. I felt a lot of pressure when meeting them"* (adopted young person)

Relationships between children and their birth relatives (Neil et al, 2011, Neil & Norry, 2019)

- Siblings: differences in age, placement, history, lifestyle, views of birth parents
- Not having up to date knowledge of the child and fear of overstepping boundaries (birth relative perspective)
- Lack of ability to relate appropriately to child (adoptive parent perspective)
- Feeling that relationships are distant (child perspective)

Sometimes mum and dad overpower her and want to pick her up and want to touch her and she backs off, because she doesn't always remember who they are.
(Adopter)

[Birth mum] has got quite a rapport with him...she does come down to his level, she'll get down on the ground and play a game and he will enjoy that.
(Adopter)

The children were running about and doing different things and you felt as if the [adoptive] family was the family and you were the outsiders
(Birth grandmother)

Assessing strengths/risks: adults

- Adoptive parents: respect and promote child's connections to birth family
- Birth relatives: respect and promote child's connections to adoptive family
- Commitment to contact and willingness to 'work at it'
- These characteristics vary between people but also over time – may be lowest at pre-adoption stage

Support must be
available

When can families manage contact themselves

- Confident, resourceful, communicatively open adoptive parents
- Birth relatives who have stable lives and who are accepting of the adoption
- No significant risk management issues
- Child reacts positively to contact
- Even so, what if circumstances change?

What happens when needed support isn't available?

- Risky contact – may be harmful to child, even destabilise placement
- Unsatisfactory contact – people start to withdraw, sometimes causing further loss and pain and/or undermining understanding and trust
- Young people or birth relatives try to find their own solutions to unmet needs – social media – can be risky when unsupported

How do social workers support contact? (Neil et al 2011, 2015)

Good practice

- Child's needs come first, but adults' needs also addressed
- Support with emotions and relationships
- Proportionate risk management

Problems in supporting contact

- Needs of one or more parties (esp. birth relatives) not addressed
- Disproportionate risk management
- Contact 'supervised' not facilitated: it may be 'safe' but not 'happy'

Contact: respecting children's links to birth and adoptive families

Every family is different

Case-by-case decision making

Contact works when relationships work

Understanding the dynamics of contact

Support must be available

Assess who needs help and provide this!

Thank you! For more information....

- Online practice resources: <http://contact.rip.org.uk/>
- The 'Contact after Adoption' study
<https://www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption/home>

Neil, E., Beek, M., and Ward, E. (2015) *Contact After Adoption: A longitudinal study of post-adoption contact arrangements*. CoramBAAF.

- 'Helping Birth Families' and 'Supporting Direct Contact after Adoption' studies
<http://www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/study5.html>

Neil, E., Cossar, J., Jones, C., Lorgelly, P., & Young, J. (2011). *Supporting direct contact after adoption*. BAAF.

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