



Exercise: understanding the significance of birth families

Research messages

A minority of adopted young people simply accept the fact of their adoption and have no wish to find out more about their origins. Children's views can change with time, but most adopted people have some curiosity about their birth family and want to understand why they were adopted. Some worry about their birth relatives or wonder if they have been forgotten. Birth parents usually live in the hearts and minds of their children even when they do not see or speak about them.

Children who grow up in adoptive families with high levels of communicative openness (that is an acceptance of difference and dual connection and of the child's thoughts and feelings about the birth family) tend to develop the most positive sense of identity as an adopted person. Such families also tend to find it easier to manage contact, which in turn provides opportunities for thinking and talking about birth families. There is no evidence that post adoption contact, in itself, affects the outcomes of adopted young people.

This exercise is aimed at helping adoptive parents and social workers understand more about the abiding significance of birth relatives for most adopted children, whether or not they have direct contact.

Listen to the audio clip of the song 'History' and **read** the accompanying explanation 'History, the story behind the song'.

- How did listening to this song make you feel?
- How might direct contact with her birth parents have helped this young woman as she was growing up?
- How might it have been difficult?
- What else, apart from direct contact, might be helpful to a young person in this situation?



Trainer's notes

Those of us involved in making contact plans are rarely around to find out how these plans worked out in the long term and we are disproportionately likely to hear about it when our plans go wrong. This makes it particularly important for us to listen to what the research tells us about how contact affects the lives of adopted young people and to attend to the stories of adopted people as individuals. Of course, we cannot know how contact would have worked out for this person, but at least it would have provided an opportunity for her to learn more about her birth parents (for good and bad) and perhaps get some of the answers to her questions. She might have found out more about where her beautiful singing voice came from (along with the support and confidence to develop this talent that the adoptive parents perhaps provided). She might have felt disappointed in the reality of her parents, but at least she would have known more about who she was grieving.

Direct contact is not always safe or possible, but photographs, letters, information and life story work can make a contribution. Adoptive parents who meet birth parents are able to give their child a firsthand account of this. Some adoptive parents and children make safe use of social media to find out more about birth relatives without choosing to make contact.