



Exercise: supporting letterbox contact

Research messages: when letterbox contact works well it can help adopted children to develop a realistic picture of their birth relatives, answer their questions and help with feelings of loss and rejection. Letterbox contact can help to reassure birth relatives about how the child is getting on, provide an opportunity for them to try and ease the child's sense of loss or rejection and keep in touch with their development, seeing likenesses as they get older. Successful letterbox contact can help to prepare everybody involved for future meetings during childhood or in adulthood. An introductory meeting between adoptive parents and birth relatives can help to get letterbox contact started well.

But letterbox contact often falters quite early on after placement. Some adoptive parents stop sending letters when birth relatives do not reply, but others keep going. Failed or unreliable letterbox contact can make adopted children feel hurt or rejected. Writing letters to a stranger is not easy and both birth relatives and adopters often need support with this.

Practitioner's support of birth relatives may be needed in a range of areas. Birth relatives are often in crisis in the immediate aftermath of care proceedings. They value post adoption support from independent agencies with whom they can be honest about how bad they are feeling and how things are going. Support in coping with the feelings that contact evokes and in clarifying roles and expectations can help adults to manage contact more successfully.

In addition, birth relatives may have poor literacy, learning difficulties or little experience of writing letters. They may worry about getting it wrong and losing contact; they may worry about sharing good news in case it seems as if they have forgotten the child; sometimes there is not much good news to share and they don't know what to put in. Birth relatives are sometimes uncertain about what is expected of them or what their role is. They may not know what to call themselves or how to start or end the letters.

This exercise is suitable for: individual learning; discussions in team meetings, training for social workers, contact supervisors, foster carers, kinship carers and adopters

Read the case study of Mikey Maddox

Imagine that you are Mikey's mother, Leanne, sitting down to write your first letter to his new adoptive parents

- What kind of information would you like to receive about how to do this?
- How would you feel about doing this? What would your intentions be? What would you be scared of? What would you hope for?
- What kinds of things would you want to include? What might you leave out?
- What support would you want? Who from?
- What would you want the adoptive family to know about you? What do you want to know about them?



Notes for trainers

The aim of this exercise is to increase empathy for birth relatives amongst practitioners and adoptive parents, allowing more sensitive support with post adoption contact, more positive responses to letters received and a greater commitment to continuing with letterbox contact even when it is difficult.