



Practice Guide: setting up meetings between birth relatives and adoptive parents

Bringing Birth Family and Adoptive Parents Together

Preparation is key

In this resource we want to promote key messages from research about the value of face to face post-adoption contact but to emphasize that practitioners and their managers need to build in time to reflect and time to prepare to get things off to a good start. The first meeting between adopters and birth family members can set the scene for successful ongoing relationships which will have a lasting benefit for a child. However this cannot be rushed. We provide some top tips for setting up first meetings.

Face-to-face contact arrangements allow for a personal and direct form of communication between adoptive parents and birth relatives. Even one-off meetings could have a powerful effect on how people felt about each other. The attitude of adoptive parents towards birth relatives was crucial in helping people to feel valued and worthy. In many cases merely the act of agreeing to face-to-face contact sent a powerful signal from adoptive parents to birth relatives, most of whom had little hope of any further meetings with the child.

Neil, E (2004) The 'Contact after Adoption' study: Face-to-face contact. In E Neil & D Howe (Eds.), *Contact in Adoption and Permanent Foster Care: Research, Theory and Practice* (pp. 65-84). London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

I know she's very happy where she is and that makes me happy (Birth parent)

What research tells us

Support services must take account of the emotional impact of contact and for all parties support in dealing with this; supporting contact is much more than just an administrative venture.

Birth and adoptive families may benefit from support to build a shared understanding of the goals of contact, to establish collaborative working relationships with each other, and to work out how emotionally close they want to be.

Grotevant, HD (2009) Emotional distance regulation over the life course in adoptive kinship networks. In G Wrobel & E Neil (Eds.) *International advances in adoption research for practice* (pp. 295-316). Chichester: Wiley.

At the planning stage, listen to children, prospective adoptive parents and birth relatives to gain a realistic understanding of people's hopes and fears about contact. Use this information to plan contact that is likely to be predictable, positive and sustained with everyone sharing an understanding of what you are hoping to achieve.



Neil, E (2013) Contact after Adoption: a longitudinal study of adoptive and birth families – summary leaflet of key findings for practitioners.

Face to face meetings make a difference – messages from the front line

Adopters tell us that the meeting provided a source of positive and direct information about the birth family. The information gathered and being able to put a face to the birth parents, reduces their fears and misconceptions about the birth family and enables them to meet their child's identity needs.

Benefits named by adopters include

- Gaining a more positive, holistic picture of birth relatives
- Being able to fill in bits of the child's history
- Having an understanding of where physical and psychological attributes may come from
- Having confirmation that the birth relative is happy for them to be the child's parents
- Less anxiety over future post 18 contact

..it does help when you write the letters you can think of things that they would be interested to hear about with him. I mean they're very proud that he horse rides ... and I was able to know that because they told me whereas if I hadn't have met them I wouldn't have known that ...'
(Adoptive mother)

Birth relatives experience of face to face meetings

For many birth relatives it is the only reliable evidence that the child will be loved and cared for in the adoptive family

- Virtually all birth relatives reported that they left the meeting feeling positive towards the adopters
- Most felt more reassured that the children would be well looked after and loved
- Some felt more reassured that the child would be told about them, and/or that adopters would keep up contact
- Some felt their pain was acknowledged and they were respected by the adopters
- Some birth relatives expressed it was much easier to respond in contact having met the adopters

(Pre – Adoption Meetings and indirect contact: Adopter and birth relative perspectives – Julie Young UEA)

'they was such lovely people, they were nice people, I mean, you know, first time I met them I felt like I'd know them for quite a while, because they were talking to me, they were getting information about Tyler, what he likes, what he didn't like, stuff like that, and it was like you could tell that they really wanted to know a lot about Tyler, so that they could carry that on, so that they weren't putting him through a different lifestyle or stuff like that ...' (Birth mother)



Setting up first meetings – things to do

- Arrange for a welcome letter or settling in card to go from adopters to the birth family. See our example which helps birth parents know their child is being cared for and a little bit about their new home. Experience shows that this can be given at the time of introductions or at any time that feels right within the first 12 weeks. Remember ‘one size doesn’t fit all.’
- Meet with adopters and birth family members separately and gather information which will help promote connections in the meetings: for example do they have interests or hobbies in common, shared hopes and aspirations for a child, etc.

Find out

- What questions do they want to ask each other?
- What messages do they want to give each other?
- Commitments they will make
- What ground rules/ boundaries will be needed and how do they feel about these. Can they stick to them? What may help?
- What information do they want to share and what do they not want to be shared?

Time for reflection – have you thought about....

- Timing – when should the meeting take place? Agency expectations and timescales may not fit with the emotional readiness of birth family members or adopters
- Who will facilitate the initial meeting and have they the information they need? If you are not the facilitator then brief them on the preparation work you have been doing so they can harness common ground and understand the adopters and birth family members’ hopes and fears about the meeting and the questions they want to ask
- How will people be introduced- first names /false names (how easy will it be to keep up if using false name/ what may be the pitfalls/how could they be overcome?)
- Choice of contact venue is important e.g. bright, light, welcoming room. Importance of a neutral venue with no reminders of previously attending same place for contact with baby or child
- How will the room be set up, what order will people come in?
- Are ‘stress free’ transport arrangements in place to get everyone there on time and back home? Assuming a parent can catch a bus home afterwards doesn’t take into account the emotions involved.
- What is the proposed length of the meeting; experience tells us that this should not be too long – 15 minutes to an hour for a first meeting may well be sufficient
- Can refreshments be provided and who will sort this out?
- Will photos be taken as a lasting memory? Benefits and challenges this may raise. What is your agency guidance on this? What other ways could capture the meeting and its lasting significance – taking minutes, audio etc.



On the day – the facilitator’s role

- Holding the process – promoting connections and a shared vision
- Reinforcing boundaries/ground rules if required. Think about what these should include, for example – confidentiality, what information can/cannot be shared, use of phones, cameras, treating others as you would want to be treated yourself etc.
- Enabling time out and support if needed
- Bringing meeting to an end with messages about next steps
- Building in time for reflection and debrief afterwards
- Ensuring acknowledgement letter is sent to birth family members following the meeting to value their contribution. See our Practice Resource: letter from adoptive parents to birth relatives after an introductory meeting.

It's really good to understand what the boundaries are so you don't over step those boundaries (Birth mother)