

Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family

Children and youth who have been adopted and maintain relationships with their birth families, caregivers, and other important people in their lives benefit in significant ways. Ongoing contact can lessen the loss and grief associated with separation, support children's identity development, and help them overcome adversity as they prepare for adulthood. Supporting the development or maintenance of these connections is in the best interests of the child and requires a strong commitment from both the adoptive and birth families. You can play an instrumental role in helping your child or youth maintain contact with his or her birth family or other important caregivers. This factsheet is intended to help adoptive parents support children, youth, and birth families in strengthening their relationships.

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Common Terms for Contact Between Adoptive and Birth Families

Adoptions in which birth parents and their children maintain ongoing contact with the support of adoptive parents is sometimes referred to as "open adoption" or "openness in adoption." Contact between birth parents and their children is most common in private domestic adoptions, less so in public adoptions, and rare in international adoptions, although all children and youth stand to benefit regardless of how or from where they were adopted. Your child's caseworker or other child welfare professionals may use these terms when discussing case plan goals or permanency planning.

Because it's in the best interests of children, youth, and families that all adoptions maintain some degree of openness, in this factsheet, we refer to "open adoption" sparingly. Instead, we focus on the importance of children maintaining birth family or caregiver relationships and how you can facilitate those relationships and help your child transition into your family without losing those valuable connections.

BENEFITS OF BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ADOPTIVE AND BIRTH FAMILIES

The practice of birth families maintaining relationships with their children who had been adopted became more commonplace in the 1980s and 1990s. The increase in these open connections is due to the recognition of the benefits for all of the adoption constellation—children who are adopted, birth and adoptive parents, and extended families. All adoptees have experienced separation, and the feelings of loss and grief associated with leaving their birth families can emerge during different developmental stages or life milestones. Maintaining and building relationships with their birth families can help them process those feelings.

Maintaining contact with their birth families may also allow children and youth to do the following:

- Relate to birth family members as real people with strengths and flaws rather than idealizing or denigrating them
- Develop a deeper understanding of their identities and a greater sense of wholeness
- Gain access to important genetic and medical information
- Preserve connections to their birth families, including their cultural and ethnic heritage
- Understand the reasons for entering foster care or being adopted, which can lessen feelings of rejection and promote a sense of belonging
- Increase the number of supportive adults in their lives
- Create a foundation for lifelong relationships

If ongoing contact wasn't discussed before the adoption was finalized, more information on beginning contact or building relationships with a child's birth family is available in Information Gateway's *Searching for Birth Relatives* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-search/>).

Adoptive and birth parents also benefit from maintaining contact and building relationships with each other. Adoptive parents, for example, develop more positive attitudes about a child's birth parents. Birth parents gain peace of mind and comfort in knowing how their child is doing. Contact also helps them deal with the loss and grief of relinquishing their child.

COMMON MYTHS ABOUT ONGOING CONTACT BETWEEN ADOPTIVE AND BIRTH FAMILIES¹

| Myth | Reality |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Adopted children will become confused about who their "real parents" are and suffer identity issues. | Adopted children and youth are not confused about who their parents are. They understand the different roles adoptive and birth parents play in their lives. They recognize who gave them life and who cares for them daily. Ongoing relationships with birth families often help to strengthen the adopted youth's sense of identity. |
| Birth parents will try to "reclaim" their children. | There is no evidence that birth parents try to take back children with whom they are in ongoing contact. Birth parents have terminated their parental rights and can't decide to take back their children after several years. |
| Adopted children will run away to be with their birth parents. | Adopted children who remain in contact with their birth parents do not feel the need to run away to them. The children's relationships are strengthened with both the adoptive and birth parents because the children see a united front by both families to support them. |
| Birth parents will be confused about their rights and responsibilities. | Birth parents who have a relationship with a child who was adopted are generally not confused about their parenting rights and responsibilities. Adoptive and birth parents can discuss their roles and involvement in a child's life to be clear about how they benefit his or her well-being and development. |
| Birth mothers who maintain a relationship with their child have more feelings of grief and loss. | Many birth mothers cope with their grief, loss, and sadness better when they are a part of their child's life, even if the relationship primarily involves letters and social media. |

The Center for Adoption Support and Education offers a webinar, "Taking the Fear Out of Open Adoption," <https://store.adoptionssupport.org/product/IND-9/taking-the-fear-out-of-open-adoption>. (The cost to watch the webinar is \$10.)

¹ Findings are based on the work of the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project. For more information, see <https://www.umass.edu/ruddchair/research/mtarp/key-findings>.

WHAT TYPE OF ONGOING CONTACT IS RIGHT FOR YOUR FAMILY?

No one type of adoption or single arrangement for ongoing contact is right for every family. Each adoption is unique, and every adoptive and birth family has its own set of contact needs and wishes. Important questions to consider and resources to help you think through related issues are discussed below.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In exploring ongoing contact between your child and his or her birth family, it is important to listen carefully to the concerns of the birth family and to thoroughly consider what is best for your child and family. Be sure to think beyond current needs and preferences to those that may arise in the future.

The following are some questions that you may want to consider:

- What forms of communication (e.g., letters, emails, videos, social media, phone calls, visits) is your child comfortable with?
- What does contact between your family and your child's birth family mean to your child?
- What role will your child's birth parents (and/or other birth relatives) play in your child's life?
- How will your contact with one child's birth family affect adopted siblings who have different relationships in their adoptions?

RESOURCES TO ASSIST IN MAINTAINING BIRTH FAMILY CONNECTIONS

The following are ways you can gain a better understanding of how and why to remain in contact with your child's birth family:

- Contact or talk with adoption professionals who understand the value of children or youth maintaining contact with their birth families. For more information, see Information Gateway's *Accessing Adoption Support and Preservation Services* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-postadoption/>) or contact AdoptUSKids (<https://adoptuskids.org/about-us/contact-us>).
- Connect with other adoptive families who maintain contact with their children's birth families. Visit Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory and check the box for "Kinship, Foster Care and Adoption Support Groups" to find a support group in your State (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>).
- Meet with a counselor or therapist with knowledge and experience in building relationships between adoptive and birth families. For more information, see Information Gateway's *Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist/>).
- Read online articles about birth family contact, including websites that provide information and research as well as blogs about personal experiences. One example is the article *Helping Children Connect With Their Birth Parents* from the North American Council on Adoptable Children (<https://www.nacac.org/resource/helping-children-connect-with-birth-parents/>).

ONGOING CONTACT WHEN THERE IS A SAFETY CONCERN

In some cases, contact with a child's birth parents may result in additional trauma for a child who has already been traumatized by abuse or neglect. If your child's relationship with his or her birth family involves a safety concern, it may be in his or her best interests for you to arrange ongoing contact that is supervised or limited to contact made indirectly through a mediator, such as an agency caseworker or therapist, or through letters and/or photos sent to an anonymous post office box or email address. This approach to contact may be appropriate if the birth parent has a mental or substance use disorder and is unable to maintain a healthy relationship or respect appropriate boundaries with your child. Such precautions may also apply if a birth parent has previously directed physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse or violence toward your child and has not sought help to address these behaviors.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES WITH MEDIATION

If you need help establishing a relationship with your child or youth's birth family, overcoming differences in how and when contact should occur, or navigating changes, mediation—meeting with a neutral third party such as an agency or adoption professional—can help. Mediation can help you determine your child's best interests after adoption as well as help you develop a written contact agreement before an adoption or assist in sorting out changing needs and roles in your ongoing relationship. If you adopted from foster care and think your family would benefit from mediation, talk with your State

adoption manager or postadoption services provider (if available) about this support service. In a private adoption, your family can often return to the adoption agency for help in arranging mediation. An adoption attorney may also be able to help your family with mediation.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR CHILD'S BIRTH FAMILY

Cooperation between you and your child's birth family will work best if you develop compassion for the birth family's situation and work with the birth parent(s) to build a mutually agreeable relationship based on trust and the best interests of your child. Initially, developing relationships may be awkward, but, over time, parents typically ease into arrangements that are the most beneficial for the child. While some adoptive and birth families arrange informal contact, others develop more formal agreements.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

To build healthy relationships between your family and your child's birth family, adoption professionals emphasize the following:

- **Stay focused on what is in the best interests of the child**, which may not always be the same as your preferences or those of the birth parents.
- **Show respect** for and acceptance of the birth family members.
- **Set clear boundaries** of what is and what is not acceptable in terms of contact and communication, and respect the limits requested by the other party.

- **Maintain open communication** that reflects a genuine commitment to maintaining a connection and be honest if you have any concerns about contact.
- **Be flexible** and recognize that needs may change over time.

As with all relationships, your child or youth's relationship with his or her birth family will evolve as family members reach different stages in their lives. Communication and contact may increase or decrease at different times, reflecting varying needs, interests, and life situations of your family, your child or youth, and the birth family. For example, youth may discover new questions and show more interest in spending time with birth relatives as teenagers than they did when they were younger.

Birth parents may have more time to spend with their child or youth at certain times and less at others (e.g., after birth or adoption of another child). Some may move to a different area, and some may just need time to themselves. It is important that adoptive and birth parents let each other know when they need to change the frequency or form of contact. A sudden, unexpected drop in contact can have negative consequences, particularly for a child or youth who may not understand why. Adoptive parents may need to help their children understand their birth parents' behaviors, especially when those behaviors are disappointing or hurtful.

SETTING COMMON EXPECTATIONS WITH POSTADOPTION CONTACT AGREEMENTS

Postadoption contact agreements, sometimes called "open adoption agreements" or "cooperative adoption agreements," are formal arrangements between your family

Watch "Creating an Open Adoption Relationship," a video produced by Open Adoption & Family Services, to hear how two adoptive and birth parents built and maintained a positive relationship in their child's best interests at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHSrChAHM_E.

and members of your child's birth family (or other persons with whom the child has an established relationship, such as a foster parent). These agreements, typically signed prior to finalization of an adoption, describe *how* (e.g., letters, emails, visits, social media) and *how often* communication will take place following an adoption.

Contact agreements can help you make sure that everyone has a shared understanding of the expectations for contact between the families, so it's important to discuss and understand the terms and limitations of the agreement and commit to them. It's also important that discussions about contact agreements are made apart from the decision to make an adoption plan. A parent should not make an adoption plan only based on a promise of contact.

It may be necessary to revise the agreement as your child grows and desires different types or frequency of contact. It is important to know, however, that these agreements are not always enforceable. About 29 States and the District of Columbia have laws that allow for written and enforceable contact agreements (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). The conditions and rules related to establishing and enforcing

contracts vary by State. In no State can disputes over the contact agreements be used as grounds for terminating an adoption or changing adoptive parents' parental rights.

For more information, see Information Gateway's *Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/cooperative/>).

USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CONTACT WITH BIRTH FAMILIES

Social networks can connect you and your child to members of his or her birth family quickly and free of charge. While there are benefits to using these platforms, there are also things to consider or be cautious about. Below are tips for using these tools to communicate and staying safe while doing so.

TIPS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA

- Talk with your child, youth, and his or her birth family about their comfort levels with social media, such as how much and what kinds of information should be shared online.
- Know about the different social media tools and how they work and decide which networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Messenger, Twitter, Instagram) are appropriate for communication and with what privacy settings.
- Before posting anything, think carefully about how your post may be received by all who might see it. Even with more restrictive privacy settings in place, information can be forwarded or shared with others.

- If ongoing contact with family members has not been established, talk with your children about how they might feel if a birth family member reaches out to them through social media and discuss possible responses.
- Keep an eye on your child's Internet and social networking use (join the same social media networks as your child, become your child's online "friend," and request or set passwords for their social media accounts).

Although the following factsheets are intended for foster parents and youth in foster care, much of the information also may be useful for adoptive parents and children or youth who have been adopted:

- *Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/smtips-parent/>)
- *Social Media: Tips for Youth in Foster Care* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/smtips-youth/>)

For additional information, see Adoptions With Love, Inc.'s *How Much Is Too Much? The Importance of Setting Boundaries on Social Media for Adoptive Families* (<http://adoptionswithlove.org/adoptive-parents/setting-boundaries-on-social-media>).

Special Considerations for Openness in Intercountry Adoption

In just the past decade, U.S. families have welcomed over 83,000 adopted children into their homes from over 100 countries. The United States is a signatory to the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (the Convention). Although the Convention does not specifically discuss "open adoption," it does address the preservation of the child's information, including the identity of the birth parents, and the child's access to such information to the extent it is permitted by law.

The following are also important aspects of intercountry adoption to consider:

- Laws and rules about adoption vary widely from country to country.
- In some countries, open adoption may not be allowed.
- Cultural factors, language barriers, and societal expectations for birth parents in their home country may influence the potential impact of open adoption or postadoption contact on the birth parents.
- Many children adopted internationally were abandoned by birth parents whose identities are unknown.
- In some countries, the fact that adoption severs the legal relationship between the child and the birth parents is not commonly understood.
- Intercountry adoption professionals, such as accredited adoption service providers and therapists familiar with intercountry adoption, can advise adoptive parents on options available and what to expect.
- Questions about intercountry adoption may be sent to the U.S. Department of State, Office of Children's Issues (Adoption@state.gov).

CONCLUSION

You can play an instrumental role in helping your child or youth maintain contact with his or her birth family or other important caregivers. An ongoing relationship with birth parents and families can provide your child with significant, caring connections that will help to normalize adoption and provide a sense of connection and belonging. With

compassion for the birth family's situation and a strong commitment to making the relationship work, you can help build trust and cooperation among your child's birth and adoptive family members that is focused on the best interests of your child.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

The following websites are general adoption resources. You will need to search within the website to find resources specific to maintaining relationships between adoptive and birth families.

- Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys (<https://adoptionart.org/>)
- *Adoptive Families* magazine (<https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/openness/the-basics-of-open-adoption/>)
- AdoptUSKids (<https://www.adoptuskids.org>)
- American Adoption Congress (http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/open_adoption.php)
- Center for Adoption Support and Education (<https://adoptionsupport.org/>)
- National Council for Adoption (<https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/>)
- North American Council on Adoptable Children (<https://www.nacac.org/>)
- Pact, an Adoption Alliance (<https://www.pactadopt.org>)

REFERENCE

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019). *Postadoption contact agreements between birth and adoptive families*. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/cooperative/>

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