



# Contact: Making good decisions for children in public law

What the research tells us about planning contact in assessment, fostering, adoption and kinship care

**At some points, contact may be a psychological necessity...to quell unbearable longing or bring reality to a distorted picture. At others it may be best put on the back burner... contact can in some circumstances do harm.**

Ian Sinclair in *Fostering Now*, 2005

## Introduction

Contact plans for children living away from their birth families can have life-changing implications for everyone involved. It is essential that such plans are informed by the best available research as well as a good understanding of the unique needs and circumstances of individual children and their families. This frontline briefing aims to make relevant research accessible to practitioners who are involved in making contact plans for children placed away from their birth parents in adoption, fostering or kinship care.

The specific issues for contact as part of assessment during care proceedings are considered, along with the contact needs of children in permanent placement – whether that is adoption, fostering or kinship care. Although some of the material in this briefing will be relevant for those involved in making contact arrangements for children in private law proceedings when parents have separated, this issue is not specifically considered here.

The following areas are explored:

### Part One

- > Legislation
- > The evidence base
- > Patterns of contact
- > The impact of contact
- > Listening to children
- > The purpose of contact
- > Contact in assessment and reunification
- > Working with parents
- > Interim contact for babies
- > Birth family contact and identity
- > Contact, separation and loss
- > Risks of contact
- > Letterbox
- > Social media

### Part Two

Planning for contact in permanent placement: A dynamic approach

- > Children
- > Adult birth relatives
- > Siblings
- > Carers
- > Support

## Part One

### Legislation

Under the *Children and Families Act 2014* the local authority has a **duty to allow reasonable contact** for looked after children (this is a change from the previous duty to promote reasonable contact set out in the *1989 Children Act*).

The new act also changes the requirements on local authorities in relation to plans for post adoption contact. The local authority must now **balance** contact decisions with the need to safeguard and promote welfare of the child, considering the importance of the relationship and the potential for disruption.

The child's welfare is paramount in relation to contact and the court is required to have regard to the child's ascertainable wishes and feelings (in light of his or her age and understanding), his or her needs, the likely effect of any changes in circumstances, any harm suffered and how capable parents and other family members are of meeting the child's needs.



#### More information

- > For more information on legislation relating to contact visit:  
[www.fosteringandadoption.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Topic-1-Legal-Frameworks-Final.pdf](http://www.fosteringandadoption.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Topic-1-Legal-Frameworks-Final.pdf)

### The evidence

There are some limitations to the research evidence in this area, with most studies focusing on contact in adoption. Many contact studies are based on small, unrepresentative samples, definitions of contact vary and most studies fail to take into account the prior functioning of children when measuring the impact of contact (Taplin, 2005). However, there is some important research in this field. The Contact after Adoption Study has collected data on 168 children placed for adoption before the age of four and has followed 65 of these

adopted children through to late adolescence, examining contact from the perspective of the young people, their birth relatives and adoptive parents.

The series of reports can be downloaded at:  
[www.uea.ac.uk/centre-research-child-family/child-placement/project-contact-after-adoption](http://www.uea.ac.uk/centre-research-child-family/child-placement/project-contact-after-adoption)

The Family Rights Group report into contact in kinship care can be downloaded at:  
[www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-and-friends-carers-e-publications-and-studies/managing-contact](http://www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-and-friends-carers-e-publications-and-studies/managing-contact)



#### Useful resources

- > *Safe Contact: Children in permanent placement and contact with their birth relatives* (Macaskill C, 2002, Random House Publishing).
- > *Planning for Contact in Permanent Placements* (Paul Adams, 2013, British Association for Adoption and Fostering).
- > *Contact in Adoption and Permanent Foster Care: research, theory and practice* (Neil E and Howe D, 2004, British Association for Adoption and Fostering).
- > *Contact and Work with Birth Families in The Child Placement Handbook: Research, Policy and Practice* (Schofield G and Stevenson O, 2009, British Association for Adoption and Fostering).



#### Questions for reflection

- > How much does research influence contact planning in your agency?
- > How aware of the evidence are your local judiciary?

## Patterns of contact

**Children who are subject to care proceedings tend to have relatively high levels of contact in the short term whilst decisions are made. Long term patterns of contact tend to be less frequent. Contact encompasses a range of activities, from shared holidays to the exchange of carefully monitored information via a third party in letterbox contact.**

Most children growing up away from birth parents have a plan for contact of some kind: adopted children tend to have infrequent contact whilst those in kinship care have the highest levels of contact with a range of family members (Wade et al, 2014). Children are more likely to remain in contact with birth mothers than birth fathers and with maternal rather than paternal family members (Neil et al, 2014; Ashley, 2011).

Contact is crucial for those children who return to parental care during childhood (the most common pathway out of the care system in childhood). Family is more than parenting and parental relationships remain important into adulthood (Ward et al, 2014; Boddy et al, 2013).

For those who remain in long term care, levels of contact with birth family and friends tend to decline over time. For a minority of children contact increases as trust builds between their two families; growing numbers of young people initiate contact independently in adolescence through social media. The majority of care leavers are in contact with birth families (Children's Rights Director for England, 2009; Neil et al, 2014; Ward et al, 2014; Boddy et al, 2013).

## Impact of contact

During the course of care proceedings there are often tensions between the parents wish to see their child frequently, the court's requirement for evidence and the child's needs for recovery and to settle in their placement. In the longer term contact can be positive, negative or mixed for children living away from their birth parents (Ashley, 2011; Macaskill, 2002) and is one among many inter-related factors which impact on a child's development.

Adopted young people's satisfaction with contact arrangements is not related to the level or type of contact they have, but to the young person's overall adjustment, the quality and stability of contact arrangements and the extent to which these match the openness desired (Neil et al, 2014). In most cases, birth family contact is unlikely to stop children settling into new families, increase the risk of disruption or lead to poor overall outcomes; age at placement, pre-placement experiences and the love, stability and support that new families provide are generally the most important factors in children's outcomes.

Contact may be contraindicated in particular circumstances; making the right decision for any one child involves balancing potential benefits against challenges and risks (Adams, 2012; Neil et al, 2014). Negative impacts of contact relate to specific individuals rather than contact in general.

Contact is often more emotionally charged for older placed children and those in foster or kinship placements (The Care Inquiry, 2013; Ashley, 2011). One study found that contact with birth parents was rated as positive for over half of children growing up in Special Guardianship placements. Where relationships are positive, contact is an informally negotiated part of everyday life in such families, but where relationships are conflicted contact can threaten children's sense of security, permanence and belonging (Wade et al, 2014).

### Reflective point

- > Most children and their carers want and value contact even when it is difficult

### Film

- > Watch an online film of over 100 children and young people giving their views during The Care Inquiry:  
[www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/pages/the-care-inquir-945.html](http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/pages/the-care-inquir-945.html)

## Listening to children

*If a young person doesn't want to keep in contact they shouldn't be forced to, if they do then a social worker should do something about it.*

Young person quoted in the *Keeping in Touch* report

Contact is very important to children, even when it is difficult. Young people generally want to have a choice about who to keep in touch with, but accept that contact sometimes needs to be stopped for their own safety (Boddy et al, 2013; Children's Rights Director for England, 2009). When children are unhappy with their contact arrangements this is usually about contact that doesn't happen, or contact with a particular person rather than in general.

Children want social workers and carers to listen to their views about contact and be proactive in making contact happen (or stop) over the long term. Practical help like taxi fares or phone credit is appreciated. Children want help with family celebrations – sending birthday cards or getting dressed up for a wedding. Children like contact to be activity-based and want contact settings to be homely (Children's Rights Director for England, 2009).

It is important to pay attention to how a child is before, during and after contact as well as their verbally expressed views. Some children have torn loyalties or ask for more contact than they can cope with emotionally (Macaskill, 2002; Sturge and Glaser, 2000).

### Questions for reflection

#### Understanding children's experiences of contact:

- > What will the child's earlier experiences of their parents and others mean for contact arrangements?
- > What pressures might the child feel they are under?
- > What could be done to make contact more enjoyable for the child?  
(Ashley, 2011)



- > The BBC series *Protecting Our Children* followed Bristol's child protection unit over the course of a year to see frontline work firsthand:  
[www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01bpjf7](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01bpjf7)  
[www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01bskrq/clips](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01bskrq/clips)

## The purpose of contact

*It is nice to be able to see her and have a complete picture...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 that it's not going to happen.*

*It is upsetting to see her how she is, but I like to see that she is OK and that she's safe.*

Young people quoted in the *Contact after Adoption* study

Contact has no inherent value in itself. It is beneficial only in so far as it meets a child's needs. Identifying the purpose of contact is the first step in making a contact plan. This will vary, depending on the circumstances of each child, family and placement and on whether permanent plans have been made for the child's future. At every stage in work with a child the purpose of contact may include:

- > build or maintain relationships
- > assure a child they are loved and remembered
- > ease the pain of separation and loss
- > give permission to settle in a new family
- > support reparation and recovery after abuse
- > provide a reality check
- > reassure that birth relatives are alive and well
- > help children to understand their history and identity (including ethnic identity)
- > support life story work and allow children to ask questions about why they do not live with birth parents.

## Contact during assessment and reunification

Contact serves a number of specific purposes when assessment is ongoing. Some studies have found that higher levels of contact are associated with an earlier return home from care, but this does not mean there is a causal link – purposeful social work intervention, strong attachments and parental commitment are all associated both with more frequent contact and successful return home (Taplin, 2005; Boddy et al, 2013).

Good quality contact is a prerequisite for reunification home, but is not sufficient to justify it. Many parents who can provide loving, playful care for two hours are not able to meet a child's needs day-to-day. Observation of contact forms a vital part of assessments of parents and other family members who have come forward to care for a child, but such assessment should never be based on observation of contact alone (a highly artificial, pressurised interaction in a protected environment).

A more structured, research-based approach is needed for assessing the risk of further maltreatment to a child when reunification is considered. The chances of successful reunification are increased when children and families have ongoing contact and support from foster carers and residential workers on return home (Farmer et al, 2008).



### Useful resources

- > Research in Practice has produced a tool that supports practitioners to take a research-based approach to assessing the risk of further child maltreatment: [www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/practice-tools-and-guides/assessing-risk-of-further-child-maltreatment-a-researchbased-approach](http://www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/practice-tools-and-guides/assessing-risk-of-further-child-maltreatment-a-researchbased-approach)

## Working with parents

Supervised contact during care proceedings represents a window of opportunity to learn more about parent-child relationships and try to improve them. Prolonged supervision of poor quality contact without intervention is a poor use of scarce resources and may be harmful for some children (Baynes, 2010).

Provision of parenting support during contact can yield useful information about parental capacity to change at a time when some families may become more open to intervention. Addressing the difficulties that led to the child's removal is also key if there is to be any prospect of successful reunification (Ward et al, 2014). Improving contact builds good memories for parent and child and increases the prospect of positive visits in the long term if children do not return home.

Work with birth families remains important, whatever the plan for the child, not least because extended families remain a critical resource for many young people leaving care and because social media is making it increasingly difficult to regulate contact. Parents of children growing up in care need support to cope with loss, accept their changed role in children's lives and to build positive relationships with new carers.

Ongoing work with parents whose children are in long-term care is more developed elsewhere, for example in Denmark where the concept of 'samvaer' – being together – underpins higher levels of parental involvement in children's day-to-day life – sharing meals, watching films and having overnight visits, often in the child's home. A strengths-based approach, social pedagogy, greater use of specialist residential care and higher levels of professional qualification appear to contribute to the success of this approach (Boddy et al, 2013).

## Interim contact for babies

All very young babies need predictable, attentive care; this need is heightened for infants who have suffered abuse or neglect in their first few weeks of life, particularly if they have been exposed to drugs, alcohol or domestic violence before birth. High frequency contact (which may involve long journeys escorted by a succession of strangers) to receive sometimes variable care from a parent who may be preoccupied, depressed, intoxicated, frightened or frightening, interferes with the development and recovery of vulnerable children.

Babies are distressed by poor quality contact. Frequency of infant contact is not correlated with higher rates of reunification (Humphreys and Kiraly, 2011; Kenrick, 2009; Schofield and Simmonds, 2011).



- > Infants are acutely sensitive to face-to-face interaction, as this film shows:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZhto](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZhto)

### Questions for reflection

- > How does this baby communicate?
- > How could you convey this in recording contact?
- > How do you feel watching this clip?
- > What might be the impact on contact supervisors who spend lengthy periods observing poor interaction?

Supporting new-born babies to settle and form an attachment with their primary carer should be the first priority in meeting an infant's needs. Contact should be set at a level that allows the baby to build a relationship with birth parents while they work towards the changes needed to make reunification a possibility. If parents succeed, contact may be increased to allow the baby to build an attachment to birth parents; secure attachment to the foster

carer is the best foundation for this. Quality is more important than quantity in infant contact.

The importance of prioritising the needs of very young children when making contact arrangements was recognised in 2010 by Lord Justice Munby, President of the Family Division, in a ruling that :

*'A parent cannot be entitled under Article 8 to have such measures taken as would harm the child's health and development'.*

This ended the assumption that babies should have almost daily contact.

### Questions for reflection

- > How much have contact arrangements for babies changed where you work?
- > Would the arrangements for transporting babies be good enough for your own child?

## Birth family contact and identity

The world in which contact plans are made has changed radically over the last fifty years, from a time when adoption was seen as a 'clean break' for relinquished babies to one in which the internet allows unprecedented opportunities for social networking. We now seek permanence through fostering, adoption or kinship care for growing numbers of abused and neglected children, older children, sibling groups, disabled children and those from ethnic minorities. For such children, contact can play an important part in making sense of their own history and identity – helping them to understand who they are, where they have come from and why they cannot live with their birth parents. Children growing up in alternative families must negotiate complex, multiple identities.



*Permanence – a sense of belonging and mutual connectedness and of continuity between past, present and future.*

The Care Inquiry, 2013

*Nobody talked to me about going into care and moving away. I was sad because I love my family so much and I didn't get to see them.*

Young person quoted in The Care Inquiry

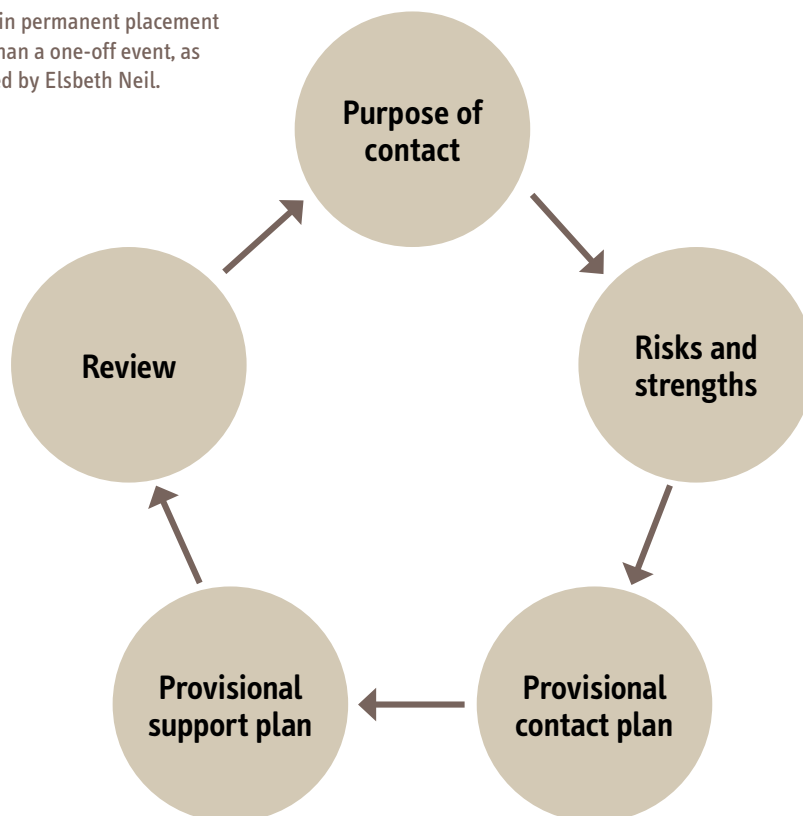
Birth families continue as a strong psychological presence for most children growing up in substitute care, especially during adolescence – they are in children's hearts and minds, whether or not they have contact or feel able to talk about them. There are consistent findings that adopted children have higher self-esteem and a more cohesive sense of

identity when placed with carers who have high levels of **communicative openness** (Beckett et al, 2008; Brodzinsky, 2006).

Contact can act as a cog that turns the wheels of communicative openness, providing opportunities for children and adoptive parents to think and talk together about birth families and the child's story (Neil and Howe, 2004).

Children growing up in long-term foster care may experience divided loyalties between their two families, with ambivalent feelings of love and anxiety towards birth families. Contact has the potential to help such children manage their sense of dual identity, but can also involve difficult transitions, painful feelings and memories (Beek and Schofield, 2005). Children growing up in kinship care tend to have a strong sense of belonging, but contact can still bring a sense of divided loyalties if it does not work well.

Planning contact for children in permanent placement is a dynamic process, rather than a one-off event, as shown in this model developed by Elsbeth Neil.



### Communicative openness:

- > Accepting the child's natural curiosity about their birth family and why they do not live with them.
- > Recognising the child's dual connection, as a member of two families.
- > Being comfortable with the difference inherent in fostering or kinship care.

Children placed in kinship care tend to have a stronger sense of belonging but thinking and talking about their intimate and painful story can be challenging and adult relationships often remain difficult (Farmer, 2009). The '**Words and Pictures Storyboard**' approach can help birth parents and kinship carers work together to create a story for their child – see [www.samenwerkenwijaanveiligheid.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/wordsandpicturesarticle.pdf](http://www.samenwerkenwijaanveiligheid.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/wordsandpicturesarticle.pdf)

## Contact, separation and loss

*When you are making changes to my life, don't stop what is already there.*

Young person quoted in The Care Inquiry, 2013

**Most children placed away from birth parents have repeated experiences of separation and loss both before and after they enter the care system. When children move – whether this is into adoption, independence, a new placement or back home – they have a particular need for contact with familiar people (including parents, siblings, extended family, foster carers, residential workers, social workers, friends and teachers).**

*I want to see all my old foster carers again.*

*Sometimes friends mean more than family.*

Young people quoted in the *Keeping in Touch* report

## Question for reflection

*Relationships with people who care for and about children are the golden thread in children's lives.*

The Care Inquiry, 2013

- > To what extent are you able to prioritise children's relationships when making plans?

Old relationships do not need to be broken to allow new bonds to form. Children are capable of multiple attachments. Keeping in touch with foster carers after a return home or move into independence can be very positive. Foster carers may be primary attachment figures for very young children moving into adoption; for others they are the first safe, nurturing adults they have encountered. It does not help to build trust in a new family if loved adults disappear from children's lives, just when they need them the most.

## Questions for reflection

- > How often do children where you work keep in touch with their foster carers when they move?
- > Are your adopters and foster carers prepared to support children with the grief they feel at the loss of this relationship?

Birth families generally remain very important to children, even when contact has to be terminated. Children and their birth relatives need ongoing support to deal with the losses they experience (Boddy et al, 2013).

## Risks of contact

*I did not want to see my real family – they were rubbish, they did not even feed me. My birth Dad forgot my name.*

Young person talking to The Care Inquiry

### Contact can present a number of risks for children of all ages, including:

- > Further abuse or neglect, particularly during unsupervised contact or when adolescents are left to make their own arrangements (Sinclair, 2005; Selwyn, 2005).
- > Re-traumatisation (Macaskill, 2002; Sturge and Glaser, 2000). Supervision can provide physical but not emotional safety for such children.
- > Loss of trust in current carers (if required to take a child to unsafe contact).
- > Being blamed for family troubles.
- > Perpetuation of harmful relationships.
- > Being given false accounts of the reasons they are in care.
- > Feeling rejected or upset by unreliable or poor quality contact.
- > Being worried by evidence of their birth families' frailty.
- > Exposure to moral values that are at odds with those of their carers (for example, crime, drug use, swearing).
- > Being overwhelmed by contact that is too frequent to allow a child to regain emotional equilibrium (Macaskill, 2002; Neil and Howe, 2004) disrupts routines and provides insufficient time to settle, rest, play and recover.
- > Undermining the placement by hostile birth relatives. The impact on carers may affect the child, particularly when relationships remain difficult in kinship care (Farmer, 2009).

### Timing and frequency:

- > Needs to depend on purpose of contact and child's individual circumstances rather than placement type or legal order.
- > Needs to be reviewed as children grow up.
- > For a minority of children, a plan for no contact is the best plan.
- > Low frequency contact can meet children's identity needs (one to four times per year).
- > Higher frequency contact is needed in order to maintain positive relationships, but this still needs to be balanced with the child's sense of belonging in their foster/adoptive or kinship family.
- > High frequency contact will not in itself improve negative relationships.
- > High levels of contact in foster care (fortnightly or monthly) can be hard to manage.
- > Poor quality contact tends to persist in kinship placements – clarity about decision-making and use of FGCs can help review (Ashley, 2011).
- > Contact at birthdays and Christmas is often hard to manage as these are emotive times (Macaskill, 2002; Neil and Howe, 2004).

## Letterbox contact

*When there is no contact, you always think the worst.*

Young person quoted in the *Keeping in Touch* report

*After I met her that was when I thought that was the worst idea, letterbox contact. Because you put them on a pedestal and then you meet them and she's an absolute crazy woman.*

Young person quoted in the *Contact after Adoption* study

Written contact can keep children in touch with birth families and may provide a stepping stone to direct contact, but often diminishes over time. Many birth parents have little experience of writing letters and live transient lives. Everyone involved may struggle to know what to write. Failed indirect contact can leave children and families feeling hurt and rejected, afraid they have said the wrong thing or even that their relative has died. A one-off meeting between birth relatives and adopters can help to establish a positive exchange (Neil et al, 2014).

There is scope for development and creativity in this area. The 'Story Book Dads' project has done innovative work in this area, keeping men and women who are in prison or in the forces in touch with their children through the use of stories – see [www.storybookdads.org.uk](http://www.storybookdads.org.uk)

### Question for reflection

- > What help do you offer those involved in letterbox contact?

## Social media

*I can't get rid of my Mum – she's always on Facebook or MSN!*

Young person quoted in the *Keeping in Touch* report

Social media can help young people keep in touch with friends and family in new ways, but can present risks. Technologically literate teenagers are particularly likely to impulsively initiate or respond to online contact as part of a natural wish to assert

independence from their carers in the context of emotional preoccupation with birth families.

Use of parental controls and limiting access to identifying information can provide some protection for younger children. Ultimately, the best protection is communicative openness, so that young people feel able to talk to their families about birth family contact (Fursland, 2013). Online contact works best when it occurs in the context of trusting relationships between families and is most likely to be problematic when it is driven by unmet contact needs (Neil et al, 2014).

Carers can help young people to keep themselves safe online by providing opportunities for 'cold cognition' – the chance to think through the potential cost and benefits of contact at a time when emotions are not heightened, paying careful attention to the young person's views. Understanding of a young person's need to stay in touch, respect for their dignity and opportunities for carefully supported risk-taking that provides 'freedom within safe limits' can also promote safety both online and face-to-face (Beek and Schofield, 2005; Simpson, 2013). Older kinship carers appreciate social work support in managing this aspect of contact (Ashley, 2011).

### Questions for reflection

- > Is social media included in your training for foster carers, adopters and kinship carers?
- > Is online contact discussed at every review and considered in every contact plan?

### More information

- > Advice about online safety in adoption and fostering can be downloaded from: [www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-and-resources/fostering-adoption](http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-and-resources/fostering-adoption)

## Part Two

### Planning for contact in permanent placement: A dynamic approach

Use of research in making long-term contact plans can help to evaluate potential risks and benefits, weigh up the likelihood of success and identify support needs. It does not replace the need to *listen* to children and their families, and understanding their unique situations.

Research has identified relevant factors in relation to the child, the birth relatives, new carers and support services; these are brought together in the final section of this briefing, building on the transactional model developed by Neil and Howe (Neil and Howe, 2004; Taplin, 2005; Neil et al, 2014; Macaskill, 2002; Sturge and Glaser, 2000). The evidence base relates largely to adoption and permanent foster care. Caution is needed in applying this model to kinship care.

Although contact plans are for children they are enacted by adults and may be helped or hindered by relationships between them and the support that does (or does not) exist.



#### Reference tool

- > To download the Research in Practice contact planning tool, developed with Elsbeth Neil, that accompanies this briefing visit: [www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/frontline-resources/frontline-briefing](http://www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/frontline-resources/frontline-briefing)



#### More information

- > To listen to Elsbeth Neil talking about her research findings, visit: [www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/study5.html](http://www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/study5.html)
- > For information on the findings of Elsbeth's longitudinal study, *Contact after adoption: a longitudinal study of adoptive and birth families*, visit: [www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption/home](http://www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption/home)

## Children

**Factors in the child associated with beneficial contact in permanent placement include:**

- > Child placed in infancy.
- > No pre-placement relationship with the birth relative, or positive or neutral relationship.
- > Absence of major behavioural or mental health problems.
- > Secure attachment to current carers, placement provides a secure base.
- > Healthy psycho-social development.
- > Child freely wants contact, is not afraid.
- > Child has positive memories.
- > Child has not witnessed violence, does not imitate violence.

**Factors in the child associated with difficult, detrimental or unsuccessful contact include:**

- > Insecure attachment, insecure placement.
- > Major behavioural or mental health problems.
- > Rejected child, has lived with several birth relatives.
- > Older child with troubled/traumatic relationship with birth parents.
- > Child is re-traumatised/overwhelmed by contact.
- > Child is afraid, feels fearful on return to placement, trust in carers is undermined.
- > Child does not want contact.
- > Child has negative memories.
- > Child has witnessed violence, imitates violence.

### Question for reflection

- > How do these messages from research fit with the children most likely to have contact in permanent placement where you work?

## Adult birth relatives

**Factors in adult birth relatives associated with beneficial contact in permanent placement include:**

- > Has never been the child's primary carer.
- > Accepts and supports the placement, affirms new carers.
- > Relinquishes parenting role.
- > Relates to the child in a positive, non-abusive way.
- > Relatively free of significant personal difficulties.
- > Reliable, punctual.
- > Accepts harm caused to child, expresses regret and remorse.
- > Does not use contact to undermine, threaten or cause conflict with carers.

### Question for reflection

*Post adoption contact for grandmother is 'strikingly successful'.*

Neil et al, 2014

- > How often do you include grandparents in contact plans?

**Factors in adult birth parents associated with difficult, detrimental or unsuccessful contact in permanent placement include:**

- > Does not accept or undermines the placement.
- > Insists on maintaining role as main carer.
- > Seriously traumatised or maltreated child in past (including through domestic violence towards other parent).
- > Neglectful, abusive or rejecting during visits.
- > Unreliable, repeatedly late.
- > Denies causing harm to the child, shows no remorse or regret.
- > Exposes child to values that are at odds with placement (for example criminality, drug misuse).
- > Significant personal difficulties (for example substance misuse, serious mental health problems).

- > Uses contact to pursue conflict with child's carer.
- > Abusive or threatening to professionals or carers, threatens abduction.

### Question for reflection

*Birth parents who are hostile to the planned placement at final hearing may be able to accept and support the new family with time.*

Neil et al, 2014

- > How often do you go back to talk to birth families as placements progress?

## Siblings

*I think brothers and sisters should always stay in touch.*

Young person quoted in the *Keeping in Touch* report

Most children want to keep in touch with siblings and may mourn deeply when contact is severed, particularly if they have assumed a parental role (Children's Rights Director for England, 2009). Most sibling contact is enjoyable; it may be sustained at a relatively high level (Macaskill, 2002). For children who have experienced abuse and neglect the usual mixture of love, loyalty, resentment, protection, competitiveness and jealousy that makes up a sibling bond may be further complicated. Siblings may have competed for scarce resources, taken on excessive responsibility or developed abusive relationships (this may improve in response to good care).

### Question for reflection

**Children in the care system often come from complex, transient families.**

- > Do you know who the children you are working with regard as siblings?

### Factors associated with successful sibling contact include:

- > activity-based visits that build up good memories of shared times together
- > children placed with carers who have similar backgrounds and share similar values
- > placements that are geographically close.

### Factors associated with difficult sibling contact include:

- > child is re-traumatised by contact or recovery is impaired
- > siblings discourage child from loving or settling in new family
- > chains of contact put the child at risk (for example sibling still in touch with abusive family members or risks to confidentiality of placement)
- > negative patterns re-emerge such as scapegoating, sexual or physical abuse, sibling cannot relinquish parental role.

*Particular care is needed in planning contact when siblings are separated as a result of one child's placement with the carer disrupting whilst the other remains.*

Macaskill, 2002



### Useful resources

- > *Where are my Brothers and Sisters?*, published by BAAF, is a useful booklet for exploring sibling relationships with children.
- > Siblings United and Siblings Together are charities that help to keep siblings in touch when they are separated through care: [www.siblingsitogether.co.uk](http://www.siblingsitogether.co.uk)

## Carers

**Kinship carers tend to be highly committed to contact and sometimes go to exceptional lengths to make this possible in difficult circumstances (Ashley, 2011).**

In addition, there is evidence that some factors are associated with beneficial contact for all types of carers:

- > Not afraid or at risk from birth parents.
- > Involved in contact planning.
- > Involved in contact, supports child.
- > Trained and prepared for supporting contact.

**Factors in foster carers and adopters associated with beneficial contact include** (please note, more research is needed to establish whether the same factors apply for kinship carers):

- > Recognition of the benefits of contact.
- > Positive attitude to birth family, acknowledgement of reasons for placement.
- > Resolved states of mind in relation to own loss/abuse.
- > Constructive, collaborative approach.
- > Sensitivity, empathy, reflective capacity.
- > Communicative openness.

**Factors in adopters and foster carers associated with difficult, detrimental or unsuccessful contact include:**

- > Does not want or is anxious about contact.
- > Afraid of or at risk from birth relatives.
- > Critical/unaccepting of birth family.
- > Unresolved states of mind in relation to own loss/attachment/abuse.
- > Unwilling to work collaboratively.
- > Not involved in contact, child has to cope without their support.
- > Lack of sensitivity, empathy, reflective capacity.
- > Lack of communicative openness.

- > Excluded from contact planning.
- > Kinship carers who are unsupported/unclear about legal status and decision-making.



## Questions for reflection

- > How much time do you spend exploring contact in recruiting and training foster carers, adopters and kinship carers?
- > What support do kinship carers get with contact where you work?

## Support

**Families often need help, both with getting contact started and with keeping it going. Contact happens in the context of heightened emotions and involves relationships between adults and children for which there are no established social norms.**

Professionals can help by:

- > working alongside children and families to make purposeful evidence-informed, flexible, individual plans
- > reviewing these plans as needs change
- > providing training, preparation and support
- > helping to clarify roles and boundaries
- > setting out clear written agreements
- > recognising the emotional impact of contact and providing support to everyone involved
- > providing financial support with travel and access to quality venues that are open at weekends and in the evenings.

This kind of support is equally important in kinship care. Kinship carers appreciate workers with specialist expertise, exploration of potential difficulties in contact early in placement, clarity about the legal status of the placement (and responsibility for future decision-making), information about support groups and access to family group conferencing (Baynes, 2014; Pitcher, 2014; Talbot et al, 2006).



Social workers need to be clear in the family court that contact is a dynamic process and not an event. Court agreed plans are only a starting point – arrangements must change and develop as children grow up and family circumstances change (Ashley, 2011; Neil et al, 2014).

## Questions for reflection

### Preparing for contact:

- > How does everyone involved in this contact feel about it?
- > What is their worst fear? Greatest hope?
- > Is everyone clear about what is expected of them?
- > What questions do they want to ask?  
What information do they want to share?
- > Who is called Mummy/Daddy? Is it OK to say “I love you, I miss you”?
- > Is it OK to have a cuddle? Change a nappy?  
Bring a present? Take photos?
- > Can we talk about why the child does not live with birth parents?
- > Who makes the rules? Who can tell the child off?
- > Who is bringing lunch? Who pays for what?
- > Who will be supporting this child? How can the child tell us if they have had enough?
- > How will we review the contact?

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