A Model for Planning and supporting post-adoption contact

Elsbeth Neil & Mary Beek

The aim of this model is to guide practitioners through the process of making contact plans for adopted children. The principles underpinning the model are that contact should be ***purposeful*** (how contact can benefit the child is the central question); individualised (taking account of the particular needs of the child, and of the particular qualities of children, adoptive parent and birth relatives that can have a bearing on contact), and that contact is a ***relationship-and based*** process that is ***dynamic*** across time. Throughout the stages described below, it is important to involve in some way all relevant parties (the adoptive parents, the adopted child where old enough, the birth relatives).

Clarifying purpose/goals/needs

Planning contact should start with a consideration of what is trying to be achieved; in particular what needs of the child is it hoped the contact could meet? It is important to think not just about the child's immediate needs, but what they might want need and feel when they are older. Contact may also meet some needs of adoptive parents and birth relatives and clarifying these goals is also important. Some possible benefits of contact are outlined below:

For adopted children:

- finding out more about their family history and about birth relatives
- finding out more about why they needed to be adopted; understanding this realistically
- finding out about how birth relatives are getting on; keeping abreast of events in the birth family
- knowing that adoptive parents can accept connections to the birth family; building trust with adoptive parents and helping communication about adoption
- making sense of being a member of two families
- being helped to feel that it is okay to settle in the adoptive family; being helped to feel part of the adoptive family
- dealing with feelings of loss or rejection; knowing you're still cared about by birth family
- understanding and valuing their ethnic or cultural heritage
- keeping in touch with important people
- the potential for a supportive relationship with birth relatives
- avoiding some of the stress and difficulties of "searching" for birth family later on

For adoptive parents:

- finding out more about the child's birth family and history
- developing an understanding of why the child needed to be adopted
- dealing with anxieties about the child's membership of the birth family
- promoting openness with the child about adoption
- showing the child you can accept and value their birth family; building trust with the child
- feeling more entitled to parent the child

- becoming closer to the child because he/she does not have an idealised view of their birth family

For birth relatives

- gaining updated information and reassurance about the child
- dealing with feelings of loss
- being able to make a contribution to the child's life after adoption (for example by: providing information, supporting adoptive parents, showing on-going care and affection, showing the child you value their adoptive family, offering a supportive relationship to child)

Thinking about the strengths and risks of all parties

How challenging contact is likely to be is affected by the characteristics of the adoptive parent, child and the birth relatives. Below are some factors that can make contact easier. The factors that can make contact more challenging are generally the opposite of these. Some of these factors may change across time and a flexible view is needed. In addition to these factors, the practical aspects of contact should be considered (for example distance, availability, writing ability etc).

	Factors that can make contact easier
Child	- Placed when very young - Good care before adoption - Few developmental problems - Has attached or likely to form a secure attachment with adopters - If older at placement, expresses positive views about keeping in touch with birth relatives
Adoptive parents	- Adoptive parents are "communicatively open" (can empathise with child and birth relatives, is open in communication with child, accepts child's dual connection, willing to communicate with birth family) - have already formed a good relationship with child, or have the capacity to act as a secure base for child
Birth relatives	- Can accept child's dual connection and can support child in adoptive family - has a realistic view of why the child needed to be adopted - has good support systems, or willing to accept professional support - is not struggling with major life problems (for example mental illness, addiction, homelessness) - has an understanding of how their role may have changed after adoption - Has previously had positive involvement in the child's life; it has not been involved in severe abuse or neglect of the child

Making a provisional plan for contact.

When thinking about the actual contact arrangements to be set up for the child, the following key points should be considered:

- the hoped-for goals of contact should be clear to everyone and the precise nature of contact should be clearly linked to these goals
- the contact plan should take account of the strengths and vulnerabilities of all parties and their wishes and feelings
- the contact plan should be sufficiently detailed to forestall later problems in relation to issues such as exchange of presents, photographs, what people will call each other, involvement of extended birth family members, whether birth relatives can spend time alone with children etc
- the role of the agency in supporting or mediating contact should be specified (see below)
- initial contact plan need to be seen as tentative/provisional and a plan for review should be included

Planning contact support

When thinking about what support (if any) may be needed to help make contact a success for the child it is important to ask the following questions (in answering these questions, the earlier assessment of people's strengths and vulnerabilities will be important). When planning face-to-face contact, think about whether support is needed during the meeting, and/or outside of the meeting:

- are there any potential risks to the child and if so, how exactly can these be managed?
- do people need help relating to each other (for example adoptive parents and birth relatives; birth relatives and the child, different sets of parents in sibling contact)?
- do people need help understanding their role in contact (birth relatives in particular may need some guidance as to their role during meetings)?
- do people need help in understanding or maintaining appropriate boundaries in contact?
- How can contact be made comfortable and pleasant or even fun for everyone, especially the child?
- Do people need help in dealing with feelings that contact may give rise to?
- What practical assistance with contact may be needed (for example the provision of a venue, help with transport or other costs, logistical help arranging meetings etc)

Reviewing contact

Over time the child may grow and want and need different things, the circumstances of birth relatives and adoptive parents (and their strengths and vulnerabilities) can also change. Systems need to be in place to review the contact to ensure that it is meeting its intended goals and if not, to make appropriate changes (including, where needed, changes to contact support). A review of contact should in essence reconsider all the points made in the sections above. If it is necessary to suspend contact plans, people may need support through and after this process and alternative ways to meet the child's needs should be considered.