Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships With Birth Families

Children and youth who are adopted need to maintain relationships with their birth families, previous caregivers,[1] or other important connections, and it is vital that their parents support them in doing so. Nurturing these relationships is in the best interests of the child, as ongoing contact with birth family members may minimize or resolve his or her feelings of grief and loss due to separation. This bulletin is intended to provide professionals with information to help children, youth, and adoptive families develop and maintain appropriate and evolving connections.

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[1] One who provides for the physical, emotional, and social needs of children or youth. Caregivers may include foster parents, grandparents or other relatives, mentors, or other adults in a parenting role who provide for a child's needs.

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Common Terms for Contact Between Adoptive and Birth Families

Today, the majority of adoptions in the United States involve ongoing contact and relationship building between adoptive and birth families. This type of adoption is also referred to as "open adoption" or "openness in adoption." You may encounter these terms in literature about adoption or hear other adoption or child welfare professionals use them when they speak about adoptions that involve various degrees of contact with birth families. The term "open adoption" is also common in State laws concerning contact agreements. (See the Encouraging Written Contact Agreements section for more information.)

For this bulletin, we focus on the importance of maintaining connections between children and their birth families or caregivers that continue to evolve as children grow and their lives change. The bulletin also discusses how child welfare professionals can help families maintain and facilitate those connections. To promote the strengths-based concept that all adoptions benefit from some degree of openness and that "closed adoptions" are not in the best interests of children, youth, and families, we refer to "open adoption" sparingly and primarily when the term is embedded in a cited publication or practice.

Learn more by visiting Child Welfare Information Gateway's webpage Maintaining Connections With Birth Families in Adoption (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/preplacement/adoption-openness/).

THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING FAMILY OR CAREGIVER CONNECTIONS

Adoption research supports maintaining relationships between children who have been adopted and their birth families, as these connections can benefit children in profound ways (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Having some degree of openness in adoption has been shown to be beneficial for most people who have been adopted, birth parents, and adoptive parents (Siegel, 2012a).

Forging and maintaining relationships with birth families can help children to do the following:

- Understand the reason for the adoption as well as its implications

- Improve their identity formation

- Understand the origins of their physical and personality traits

- Find other supportive adult relationships

- Increase their desire to meet siblings[2] and other family members

- Increase communication about their adoption with their families

- Feel positive about their birth mothers and others

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[2] See Information Gateway's *Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/siblingissues/) for more detailed information on helping children maintain connections with birth siblings when one or more are adopted or in foster care.

Other studies on children and adults who have maintained contact and developed relationships with birth families show the following:

- Adolescents who had long-term direct contact with the birth families who relinquished them as infants were reported to have significantly fewer externalizing behaviors than adolescents with no birth family contact (Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006).

- Face-to-face contact between birth and adoptive family members helps to enhance adoptive parents' relationships with their children and develop a close attachment to them as well as feel confident and secure in their role as adoptive parents (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

- Adoptive parents in active relationships with birth parents showed significantly greater empathy for their children and the children's birth parents (Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994) and communicated more with their children about adoption compared with those who weren't actively engaged with their children's birth parents (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011).

Conversely, one study shows that adolescents who feel dissatisfied with the amount of contact they have with their birth families may have negative feelings about adoption (Grotevant, Lo, Fiorenzo, & Dunbar, 2017).

Contact between adoptive and birth families is a relatively new concept in intercountry adoption—where language barriers, cultural differences, and geographical distance can make continuing contact difficult. Some families involved in intercountry adoptions see how domestic adoptions have benefitted from maintaining connections with birth families and want to incorporate that into their own families (Seymore, 2015). Adoption professionals can encourage adoptive families to facilitate a sense of connection by visiting the child's country of origin, learning the language, and incorporating aspects of the culture into daily life (e.g., food, clothing). Professionals can also coach parents in normalizing conversations about birth families to encourage their children to share their feelings about their birth parents. Helping children feel comfortable with expressing themselves openly with their parents can deepen their attachments and support healthy development (Smith, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS FOR CASEWORK PRACTICE

Agency staff play a critical role in helping adoptive and birth families communicate regularly so children can maintain connections with their birth families. This section addresses how caseworkers can support connections between children and their birth families that are in the child's best interests,[3] encourage written contact agreements, mediate birth family relationships to help families overcome potential challenges, and help children maintain important relationships even when there are safety concerns.

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[3] See Information Gateway's *Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/best-interest/) for information about guiding principles for determining a child's best interests and State laws that discuss relevant factors to consider.

SUPPORTING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THEIR BIRTH FAMILIES

Findings from a longitudinal study of parents who maintained relationships with the birth parents of the children they adopted suggest that a commitment to ongoing contact for the sake of the child is a key factor in making those relationships work (Siegel, 2012b). According to the adoptive parents involved in the study, forming a successful relationship between themselves and their child's birth parents requires a shared focus on the needs of the child; honesty; self-awareness; communication; flexibility; clear boundaries; and a compassionate, nonjudgmental view.

The National Resource Center for Adoption (2014), a program formerly funded by the Children's Bureau, recommended the following strategies for agency staff to support successful communications between adoptive and birth families:

- Encourage foster parents and kinship caregivers to build and maintain relationships with a child's birth family before the adoption to promote future relationship building. Regardless of the permanency case plan goal (e.g., reunification, adoption), foster and prospective adoptive parents must work together with birth families to support connections between the child and his or her birth family.

- Help older children and youth address their needs about maintaining connections and building relationships with their extended families before an adoption has been finalized. Inform youth about contact

agreements and the role of adoptive parents in helping them determine contact needs with their birth families. (See the Encouraging Written Contact Agreements section for more information.)

- Educate children and birth and adoptive families on ways to remain in contact (e.g., letters, emails, phone calls, personal visits, social media). Emphasize to families that the type and level of communication should be in the best interests of the child and that communication needs may change over time.

- Introduce prospective adoptive families to current adoptive families who are successfully maintaining continuing contact after adoption so that prospective families can learn from them.

- Refer birth and adoptive families to agency or community mediation services for assistance in creating formal contact agreements. (See the Mediating Birth Family Relationships to Help Families Overcome Potential Challenges section for more information.)

- Assist adoptive families with how they can use social media[4] to support their children in seeking to contact or connect with birth family members, including siblings, cousins, grandparents, and others.

Although these strategies were developed for foster care adoption, they may also be useful for private and kinship adoptions.

Agency staff who work with families to support connections between children and

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[4] Families also may be interested in using other inexpensive forms of technology, such as texting or video calls (for example Skype or FaceTime), to support ongoing connections and communication.

their birth families should be aware of the impact adoption has on those involved. Children or youth who have been adopted may have attachment issues because they are grieving the loss of being raised by their birth family, among other issues. The National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Child Welfare Professionals offers free online training that assists caseworkers and other agency staff in identifying strategies that help families create a nurturing environment to facilitate healthy attachment and address trauma. You may access the training (modules 3, 5, and 7 are most relevant to attachment issues) at https://adoptionsupport.org/nti/cw-demo/.

Developing ongoing relationships should be viewed as a process that occurs over time rather than something that happens immediately. Relationships that develop gradually may help birth and adoptive families move to higher levels of engagement and more frequent or personal communication. For more resources and information on helping adoptive and birth families to develop healthy relationships, visit Information Gateway's Maintaining Connections With Birth Families After Adoption webpage (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/postplacement/connections/).

Although agencies should have policies regarding how to support relationships between adoptive and birth families, including staff roles, agency policy should not dictate the type or frequency of contact (Siegel, 2008). Healthy relationships and ongoing communication work best when they are based on the wishes, strengths, and characteristics of the child and families involved. Overarching policy may not apply to the diversity of families and their unique needs at various times and points in their relationships.

Staff should help birth and adoptive families identify the level and methods of communication and interaction that are best for the child, both in the present and as the child's needs and preferences change in the future. Agencies also should ensure that adoption support and preservation services are available, either in house or through referrals, to help families build relationships and maintain connections. To learn more, see Information Gateway's bulletin, *Providing Adoption Support and Preservation Services* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-postadoptbulletin/).

Caseworkers may also support children who were adopted who want to search for or contact their birth families. See Information Gateway's Search & Reunion webpage for helpful information (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/search/).

Identifying Adult Connections in a Child's Life

The Youth Connections Scale (YCS) helps agency staff engage children and youth to identify caring adults with whom they maintain "meaningful relationships," as defined by the children or youth. Developed to help practitioners identify and strengthen youth connections to significant adults (e.g., foster parents, mentors, therapists) in their lives, this five-part form completed by the youth with their caseworker clarifies youth's understanding of their connectedness and the importance of their emotional, financial, and social safety nets. It may also assist caseworkers in determining with whom a child or youth maintains connections, where relationships can be strengthened, and what kinds of support the child or youth can expect from having these relationships.

While it is vital that a child or youth be supported in maintaining connections with caring adults outside of his or her birth family, staff who assist youth in completing this tool must understand that maintaining connections with other adults is not a substitute for maintaining connections with one's birth family. As such, professionals can also use the YCS to evaluate casework practice and strategize ways for children and youth to maintain connections and build relationships with their birth families. Professionals may use the model as a tool to work together with youth and facilitate discussion with them about their meaningful and healthy relationships.

To learn more about the YCS, including the importance of connections and how to implement the scale in casework practice; take the online learning module, *Measuring Relational Permanence: Youth Connections Scale*; and review other YCS materials, visit the website of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (https://cascw.umn.edu/portfolio-items/ycs/).

ENCOURAGING WRITTEN CONTACT AGREEMENTS

Contact agreements, also known as open adoption agreements or cooperative adoption agreements, are arrangements that allow contact or communication between a child's adoptive family, his or her birth family, and usually the child, after the adoption has been finalized. These agreements range from informal, mutual understandings to written, formal contracts between the birth and adoptive families. Although not required by States, a mutually acceptable written agreement that sets clear boundaries and expectations about how, when, and for how long contact will occur can help build positive relationships between families and maintain verbal agreements.

No national standard template for written contact agreements is available. Some agencies, however, may have templates that agency staff are encouraged to use to work collaboratively with families to write an agreement that is in the best interests of the child. For legal issues concerning contact agreements, agency staff should consult with their agency leadership because laws about contact agreements vary by State. For example, contact agreements are legally enforceable in some States but not in others.

Additionally, given the widespread use of social media, agency staff may want to discuss social media considerations with birth and adoptive families and consider including social media provisions[5] in their contact agreements. For more information, see Information Gateway's Social Media in Adoption webpage (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/intro/social-media-adoption/).

Formal contact agreements must be approved by the court or judge that has jurisdiction over the adoption in order to be legally enforceable. In general, the court will only approve the agreement if it finds that the agreement serves the best interests of the child as well as protects the child's safety and the rights of all parties to the agreement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). For more information on contact agreements, including State-specific statutes and the court's role in approving, enforcing, and modifying agreements, see Information Gateway's publication, *Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/cooperative/).

State Statutes Relating to the Best Interests of the Child

For more information on laws relating to the best interests of the child, contact agreements, and concurrent planning, see the State Statutes Search section of the Information Gateway website (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/) and select the topic of interest.

EMPHASIZING THE USE OF CONCURRENT PLANNING

Concurrent planning[6] is based on the understanding that children benefit by maintaining connections to their birth families, past caregivers, or other supportive adults in their lives. According to the National Center for Child Welfare Excellence, concurrent planning can lay a strong foundation for ongoing relationships with the child or youth if the foster parents become the adoptive parents (see http://www.nccwe.org/toolkits/concurrent-planning/overview.htm). Practicing concurrent planning means communicating openly and actively involving birth and resource parents in all stages of developing permanency goals. When done well, concurrent planning strengthens and builds upon partnerships between birth and resource families. It also ensures active extended family support to parents and ownership by all parties in a good outcome for the child.

In addition to reducing the amount of time a child spends in out-of-home care, the following are benefits of concurrent planning (Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center, 2014):

- Quicker resolution and permanency for the child

- Direct communication and clarity among the agency, birth parents, resource parents, the child, and kin regarding the plan for permanency

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[5]   Provisions may be for allowable or encouraged forms of social media contact, as well as any restrictions for contact.
[6]   Concurrent planning seeks to attain permanency at the earliest possible point following a child's entry into foster care. It involves pursuing reunification while also identifying an alternative permanency goal that will best serve the child's needs if reunification is not possible. It's important to prepare resource families to be fully involved in concurrent planning by actively supporting reunification while also preparing to be a permanent family for a child.

- Fewer placements for the child

- Involvement of family members in identifying kinship placement options

- Development of a network of relatives and resource parents willing to support birth families and serve as a potential permanency resource

For more information on concurrent planning, see the Information Gateway bulletin, *Concurrent Planning for Timely Permanence* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/concurrent-planning/).

Support Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families

Families who are helping children or youth maintain connections with their birth families may need support services to help them nurture and navigate these relationships. To help improve child and family well-being, including the development of strong relationships, agencies should ensure their support services—both for before and after the adoption—include the following characteristics (AdoptUSKids, 2015):

- **Child centered and family focused:** Sees the child or youth as a unique person who has strengths, interests, and needs; serves the whole family, not just the birth and adoptive parents

- **Adoption or permanency competent:** Understands the core issues in adoption and supports healthy relationships within and between adoptive and birth families

- **Trauma informed and trauma responsive:** Addresses the effects of trauma and how to assess the child's trauma history

- **Relationship based:** Builds a strong, equal partnership between families and a professional to ensure one point of contact for families seeking services

- **Strengths based:** Identifies the skills, knowledge, interests, abilities, and other positive attributes of a child or youth and family to help with forming healthy attachments

- **Culturally responsive:** Acknowledges the unique issues facing a family with services tailored to meet its racial, ethnic, linguistic, and other cultural needs

- **Flexible and accessible:** Enables children, youth, and families to access support when they have a need rather than on a set schedule

Agency staff should also ensure that they are equipped with the skills, experience, and training necessary to provide such support services. Agencies should also collaborate with community partners who can provide critical services to facilitate supporting families. For more information on support services for families, including suggested agency trainings and assessing agency readiness to provide services, see the Children's Bureau's Capacity Building Center for States' publication, *Prepermanency Services for Adoptive and Guardianship Families* (https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/capacity/Blob/114938.pdf?r=1&rpp=10&upp=0&w=+NATIVE%28%27recno%3D114938%27%29&m=1).

MEDIATING BIRTH FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS TO HELP FAMILIES OVERCOME POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Although most adoptive families view their ongoing relationships with birth families positively, these relationships may present challenges (Siegel, 2012b). Adoptive families may be concerned that they are not respecting the birth families' privacy, or they may be concerned about the birth family intruding upon their own privacy (Black, Moyer, & Goldberg, 2016). Other potential challenges include one party desiring a different level of contact, not following through on the contact agreement, and breaking trust (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

The availability of personal information on the Internet presents another potential challenge. This information may cause privacy concerns because people are more easily able to research contact information than in the past. Although private adoption agencies may have internal policies in place regarding search and reunion to protect individuals' identities or establish other boundaries, constellation members may instead use the Internet to find information or try to make contact. When possible, professionals should provide these individuals the same level of support and education as they would those who undergo the more traditional search-and-reunion process. Professionals may refer families to Information Gateway's *Searching for Birth Relatives* factsheet (https://www.childwelfare. gov/pubs/f-search/) for more detailed information about the process and emotions they are likely to experience.

Additionally, family needs regarding how to communicate and maintain relationships may change over time. Birth and adoptive families may need to decide whether to adjust their commitments due to changing circumstances or react to changes requested or made by the other party.

Caseworkers can use the following methods to help families overcome these and other potential challenges:

- Encourage families to communicate openly and honestly.

- Help educate birth and adoptive families so they can better understand the perspective of the other family.

- Keep the focus on the needs and experiences of the child.

- Support the development of written contact agreements that help establish appropriate expectations, set boundaries, and offer flexibility for needs that may change over time.

- Offer adoption support and preservation services to adoptive and birth families and persons who are adopted.

Some adoptive and kinship care families may need special support services, such as birth family mediation, to help them negotiate relationships with a child's birth family and feel more comfortable working with and maintaining connections with the birth family (AdoptUSKids, 2015). For families who need or are likely to benefit from mediation, caseworkers can refer them to a mediator

who has experience with birth and adoptive families. Mediation, which refers to meeting with a neutral third party such as an agency or adoption professional, can help families maintain connections or build relationships by overcoming challenges in how or when contact should occur, navigating changing needs and roles later in the adoption, or developing written contact agreements.

To learn more, visit Information Gateway's Mediation for Permanency Planning webpage (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/planning/mediation/).

MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WHEN THERE IS A SAFETY CONCERN

Even when it is not safe for the child to maintain a relationship with a birth parent through contact such as unsupervised visits, it may be in the child's best interests to maintain connections via other kinds of contact, such as letters or email, a mediator, or supervised visits with the birth parents. This may be true if the following applies:

- A birth parent is unable to maintain appropriate relationship boundaries with a child due to mental or emotional illness.

- A birth parent has directed abuse or violence at a child, which indicates that contact would likely result in more trauma for the child.

The adoptive family can help caseworkers and other professionals support the child and birth family in maintaining the child's connections in safe ways. Caseworkers may confer with an adoption-competent mental health provider and talk with the adoptive family for additional assistance in determining the best contact options for a child (such as contact with the

birth parents or, if the parents are not able to be involved in a way that is safe for the child, a member of the extended family). For more information on working with a mental health provider, see Information Gateway's Collaboration With Mental Health Services webpage (https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/practice-improvement/collaboration/health/).

CONCLUSION

When children who are adopted maintain relationships with their birth families and previous caretakers, they benefit in significant ways. The type and level of contact with birth families may change over time, but being connected to his or her birth parents can mitigate a child or youth's grief and loss, strengthen identity development, and prepare the child emotionally for adulthood. Adoptive and birth parents who prioritize the child's best interests and developmental needs regularly facilitate positive relationships that support the child in comfortable and caring ways.

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