

Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family

Children who have been adopted can benefit significantly from maintaining relationships with their families of origin.¹ Ongoing contact can lessen the loss and grief associated with separation, support children's identity development, and help them prepare for adulthood. Supporting the development or maintenance of these connections can support children's long-term well-being and requires a strong commitment from both the adoptive family and the family of origin. You can play an instrumental role in helping your child maintain contact with his or her family and other important caregivers. This factsheet is intended to help adoptive parents support children and families of origin in strengthening their relationships.

¹ Families of origin encompass the significant caregivers and connections who raised someone, including parents, grandparents, other relatives, mentors, or other adults in a parenting role who provide for a child's needs. This also includes siblings, cousins, and other family members. For this factsheet, we primarily use the term "family of origin" rather than "birth family" to capture the many contexts in which children are raised. "Birth family" is used sparingly and when citing research.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Benefits of relationships between adoptive families and families of origin

What type of ongoing contact is right for your child?

Building and maintaining relationships with your child's family of origin

Using social media for contact with families of origin

Conclusion

Resources for more information

Common Terms for Contact Between Adoptive Families and Families of Origin

Adoptions in which families and children maintain ongoing contact with the support of adoptive parents are sometimes referred to as "open adoptions" or "openness in adoption." 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, we use "open adoption" sparingly in this factsheet. Instead, we focus on the importance of children maintaining family relationships, how you can facilitate them, and how you can help your child transition into your family without losing valuable connections.

BENEFITS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ADOPTIVE FAMILIES AND FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Ongoing relationships between children who are adopted and their families of origin can profoundly support their identity development, emotional well-being, and understanding of personal history. All children who are adopted experience separation, and the feelings of loss and grief associated with leaving their families can emerge during different developmental stages or life milestones. Maintaining and building relationships with their families of origin

can help children process those feelings. In addition, [extended contact with relatives is linked](#) to more positive psychological adjustment and relational experiences in young adulthood.

Maintaining contact with their families may allow children to do the following:

- Relate to family members as real people with strengths and flaws rather than idealizing or denigrating them
- Develop a deeper understanding of their identities
- Gain access to important genetic and medical information
- Preserve connections to 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

More information on beginning contact or building relationships with a child's family is available in Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Searching for Birth Relatives](#).

Adoptive families and families of origin also benefit from maintaining contact and building relationships with each other. For example, adoptive parents can build a deeper appreciation and understanding of a child's family, while families of origin can experience reassurance and comfort in knowing their child is thriving. Ongoing contact can also encourage ongoing healing, helping families of origin balance feelings of loss with greater peace and connection.

COMMON MYTHS ABOUT ONGOING CONTACT BETWEEN ADOPTIVE FAMILIES AND FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Myth	Reality
Children who are adopted will become confused about who their "real parents" are and suffer from identity issues.	Most adopted children are not confused about who their parents are and do not develop identity issues. On the contrary, a lack of knowledge about one's family and background can contribute to issues during adolescent identity development .
Families of origin will try to "reclaim" their children.	Adoption is a legal process—along with a social and emotional process—involving a legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities. Establishing relationships with families of origin long before adoption occurs can help both families of origin and adopted children understand the reasons for adoption and expectations for postadoption relationships.
Children who are adopted will run away to be with their families of origin.	Adopted children who have not had contact with their families of origin may feel curious or try to reestablish relationships. It is important that adoptive families are supportive and proactive about relationships with families of origin. If youth are supported in exploring relationships before adoption occurs, they will likely be better equipped to handle expectations and safety concerns, rather than romanticizing a relationship they've never known and feeling as though they've been left out of conversations and decisions. Further, having multiple supportive connections can contribute to a young person's sense of relational permanency , or lifelong support that lasts into adulthood.
Families of origin will be confused about their rights and responsibilities.	Family members of origin who have a relationship with a child who was adopted are generally not confused about their parenting rights and responsibilities. Establishing clear expectations and lines of communication regarding contact can reduce misunderstandings and confusion. Adoptive families and families of origin can discuss their roles and involvement in a child's life to clarify how they support the child's well-being and development.
Families of origin who maintain relationships with their children have more feelings of grief and loss.	Rather than amplifying grief, continuing communication can support ongoing efforts to promote healing by mitigating feelings of loss and grief for both families of origin and the child who was adopted.

WHAT TYPE OF ONGOING CONTACT IS RIGHT FOR YOUR CHILD?

No one type of adoption or single arrangement for ongoing contact is right for every child. Each adoption is unique, and every family has its own set of contact needs and wishes. Adoptive families have the ability and responsibility to foster an atmosphere of trust and respect that supports their children's ongoing connections with their families of origin. 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 family of origin, it is important to listen carefully to the concerns of all parties, especially regarding what is best for the child. Be sure to ask your child what he or she wants, make sure he or she feels heard, and honor his or her wishes when possible. During conversations, look beyond current needs and preferences to those that may arise in the future.

Some questions that you may want to consider follow:

- Who are the important relatives and caregivers with whom your child would like to remain in contact?
- What forms of communication (such as visits, phone calls, social media, texts, emails, videos, or letters) are you and your child comfortable using?
- How does your child feel about contact between your family and his or her family of origin?
- What role will your child's family of origin play in his or her life?
- How will your contact with one child's family of origin affect siblings who were also adopted who have different relationships in their families of origin?
- What are your feelings about your child maintaining relationships with his or her family of origin?
- Who can you talk to about complicated feelings so that they do not negatively impact your relationship with your child or his or her opportunity to connect with family of origin?
- How do you talk about your child's family of origin? Is it free from negativity that could influence your child?

RESOURCES TO ASSIST IN MAINTAINING FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Several ways you can gain a better understanding of how and why to remain in contact with your child's family are included below:

- Talk with adoption professionals who understand the value of children maintaining contact with their families of origin. For more information, see Information Gateway's [Providing Adoption Support and Preservation Services](#) or contact [AdoptUSKids](#).
- Connect with other adoptive families who maintain contact with their children's families of origin. Support groups are a great way to connect with others who have similar experiences and gain insight, tips, and guidance from their adoption journeys. Learn more about finding support groups for adoptive parents on the [Adoption Network website](#).

- Meet with a counselor or therapist with knowledge and experience in building relationships between adoptive families and families of origin. For more information, see Information Gateway's [Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists](#).
- Read articles about family contact on websites and blogs that provide information, research, and personal anecdotes. One example is the article ["Helping Children Connect With Their Birth Parents"](#) from Families Rising.

ONGOING CONTACT WHEN THERE IS A SAFETY CONCERN

In some cases, contact with a child's family of origin may result in additional trauma for a child who has already been traumatized by abuse or neglect. It is important to comply with any court orders that specify provisions related to postadoption contact or visitation. In addition to specific court orders, there are other considerations for contact in situations with safety concerns. If your child's relationship with his or her family of origin involves a safety concern, it may be in his or her best interests for contact to be supervised or arranged through a mediator, such as an agency caseworker or therapist, or through letters and photos sent to an anonymous post office box or email address. This approach to contact may be appropriate if the parent has a mental health or substance use disorder—treated or untreated—and is unable to maintain a healthy relationship or respect appropriate boundaries with your child. Such precautions may also apply if a parent has previously directed physical, emotional, 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's family of origin, overcoming differences in how and when contact should occur, or navigating changes, mediation can help. Mediation involves meeting with a neutral third party, such as an agency or adoption professional, who can help you determine your child's best interests after adoption, 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 program 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 arranging mediation. An adoption attorney may also be able to help your family with mediation.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR CHILD'S FAMILY OF ORIGIN

Cooperation between you and your child's family of origin will work best if you practice compassion and build a mutually agreeable relationship based on trust and your child's wishes and best interests. 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 families and families of origin arrange informal contact, others develop more formal agreements.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

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

- **Honor your child's wishes** when safe and support him or her in expressing thoughts about contact with his or her family of origin.
- **Stay focused on what is in the best interests of the child**, which may not always be the same as your or others' preferences.
- **Show respect** for and acceptance of the family of origin. How you reference and talk about your child's family of origin can impact your child's perception of them.
- **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's relationship with his or her family of origin will evolve as family members reach different stages in their lives. Communication and contact may increase or decrease at different times, reflecting the varying needs, interests, and life situations of your family, your child, and the family of origin. For example, youth may discover new questions and show greater interest in spending time with relatives as teenagers than when they were younger or they may learn about and connect with

siblings with whom they had not previously been connected.

Families of origin may have more time to spend with children at certain times and less at others (e.g., after the birth or adoption of another child). Some may move to a different area, and some may need time for themselves. It is important that adoptive families and families of origin 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 who may not understand why. Adoptive parents may need to help their children understand the behaviors of members of their families of origin, 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 and members of your child's family of origin (or other persons with whom the child has an established relationship, such as a foster parent). These agreements, typically signed before an adoption is finalized, describe how (e.g., visits, phone calls, emails) and how often communication will occur following an adoption.

Contact agreements can help you make sure that everyone has a shared understanding of the expectations for contact between families, so it's important to discuss and understand the agreement terms and limitations 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 based only on a promise of contact.

It may be necessary to revise the agreement as your child grows and desires different types or frequencies 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 written, enforceable contact agreements. 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](#).

SUPPORTING EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS

Just as vital as establishing postadoption connections with families of origin is supporting the existing bonds that young people wish to carry with them as they transition into permanency. Many children in care already have existing relationships they would like to maintain after adoption. Talk to young people about those important connections, ideally before adoption occurs. Make a plan so they can continue nurturing those relationships, including those with adults who can offer lifelong support to youth, such as foster caregivers, mentors, or teachers. It is also important to support friendships and relationships with peers, as those can be challenging for a young person

to maintain while moving through the foster care system and transitioning to permanency.

Sibling relationships are among some of the most important connections a young person has. Siblings who are not adopted together may wish to maintain contact, and there are many [benefits of sibling relationships](#), such as buffering the effects of maltreatment and removal from families of origin. Explore the importance of sibling relationships in the AdoptUSKids blog post, "[I know first-hand the importance of sibling relationships in foster care.](#)"

USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CONTACT WITH FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Social media networks can connect you and your child with members of your child's family of origin quickly and free of charge. While there are benefits to using these platforms, it is important to be cautious and stay safe while doing so. Explore the following tips for using social media:

- Talk with your child and his or her family of origin 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 platforms and decide which sites (e.g., Facebook, Messenger, X, Instagram) are appropriate for communication. Establish appropriate 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 relative reaches out to them through social media and discuss possible responses.
- Keep an eye on your child's Internet and social media use (join the same social media networks as your child, become your child's online "friend," or request passwords for their social media accounts). On some platforms, [teen accounts](#) that offer parental monitoring and additional privacy and safety features are available.

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

- [Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers](#)
- [Social Media: Tips for Youth in Foster Care](#)

For additional information, see the article "[How Much Is Too Much? The Importance of Setting Boundaries on Social Media for Adoptive Families](#)" on the Adoptions With Love website.

Considerations for Openness in Intercountry Adoption

Intercountry adoptions can pose unique challenges for maintaining contact with families of origin, as laws, language barriers, cultural differences, and geographical distance can make continuing contact difficult. The United States is a signatory to the 1993 Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, an international treaty that establishes minimum standards for intercountry adoption and ensures that such adoptions are in the best interests of the child. The convention also requires countries to maintain and safeguard records related to a child's identity, including family of origin details and background information.

Social media and technology can play a role in contact with family members of origin living in another country. Intercountry adoption professionals, such as accredited adoption service providers and therapists familiar with intercountry adoption, can advise adoptive parents on available options for family contact in international adoptions and what to expect. Adoptive families can also foster a sense of connection by visiting the child's country of origin, learning the language, and incorporating aspects of the child's culture into daily life, such as food and clothing.

CONCLUSION

You can play an instrumental role in helping your child maintain contact with his or her family of origin. Establishing connections with your child's family of origin early in the process can help you understand your child's relationships and background. An ongoing relationship with 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 family of origin's situation and a strong commitment to making the relationship work, you can help build trust and cooperation that are in your child's best interests.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

Explore the following websites to find general adoption information and resources specific to maintaining relationships between adoptive families and families of origin:

- [Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys](#)
- [AdoptUSKids](#)
- [Center for Adoption Support and Education](#)
- [National Council for Adoption](#)

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