

# Maintaining Relationships With Families of Origin

Children who are adopted need to maintain relationships with their families of origin<sup>1</sup> (when possible and safe to do so), and it's vital that both caregivers and professionals support them in nurturing these relationships. Ongoing contact with important connections is in children's best interests as it may reduce feelings of grief and loss due to separation. It can also have positive impacts on their mental health, sense of identity, and long-term outcomes. This bulletin provides information to help professionals support children and adoptive families in developing and maintaining connections with families of origin.

<sup>1</sup> 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 bulletin, we 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 the term is embedded in cited research.

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## Common Terms for Contact Between Adoptive Families and Families of Origin

Today, the majority of adoptions in the United States involve ongoing contact and relationship building between adoptive families and families of origin. This practice 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 speaking about adoptions that involve various degrees of contact with families of origin. The term “open adoption” is also common in State laws concerning contact agreements. (See the [“Encourage Written Contact Agreements”](#) section of this bulletin for more information.)

For this bulletin, we focus on the importance of maintaining connections between children and their kin that continue to evolve as children grow and their lives change. We also discuss 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 and families, we limit the use of the term “open adoption.”

### THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS

Relationships between children who have been adopted and their families of origin can benefit children in profound ways (AdoptUSKids, 2023). This applies to both kin and nonkin adoptions. Forging and maintaining relationships with families of origin can help children to do the following:

- Understand the reason for the adoption and its implications
- Improve their identity formation
- Understand the origins of their physical and personality traits
- Find other supportive adult relationships
- Increase their desire to establish and maintain relationships with siblings<sup>2</sup> and other family members
- Increase communication about their adoption with their families

- Feel positive about their families of origin and others

Studies on relationships between children and families of origin show the following:

- Young adults who experienced extended contact with birth relatives for most of their lives displayed more positive psychological adjustment than those with no, limited, or stopped contact (Lo et al., 2023).
- Young adults with extended contact with birth relatives for most of their lives reported more positive feelings and relational experiences with their birth mothers than those with no, limited, or stopped contact (Lo et al., 2023).
- Adolescents who were adopted in infancy and did not have contact with birth family members expressed desires to initiate contact and learn about their family (Lo et al., 2024).

<sup>2</sup> See Information Gateway's [Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption](#) for more detailed information on helping children maintain connections with siblings when one or more are adopted or in foster care.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CASEWORK PRACTICE

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

### SUPPORT CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Findings from a longitudinal study of adoptive parents who maintained relationships with the birth parents of their adopted children suggest that a commitment to ongoing contact for the sake of the child is a key factor in making those relationships work (Siegel, 2013). According to the adoptive parents involved in the study, forming a successful relationship between themselves and their child's birth parents required a shared focus on the needs of the child; honesty; self-awareness; communication; flexibility; clear boundaries; and a compassionate, nonjudgmental view.

The National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support recommends the following strategies for adoption professionals to support successful communication between

adoptive families and families of origin (National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support, 2024):

- Dispel common misconceptions about contact with families of origin. Adoptive families may feel that contact with families of origin can create confusion or discomfort for children. Adoption professionals should debunk misconceptions like these and convey factual information.
- Educate children, families of origin, and adoptive families on ways to remain in contact (e.g., letters, text messages, phone calls, emails, social media, video calls, in-person visits, and photo-sharing platforms). Professionals may also encourage families to brainstorm creative ways of staying in touch that are not listed above.
- Explain that contact agreements may be formal or informal and that it is important for families to establish agreed-upon patterns of contact. Sticking to these established plans can give families and children a consistent and predictable relationship that can be adjusted as needed over time. Refer families to agency or community mediation services for help with creating formal contact agreements.

Other effective strategies may include the following:

- Set expectations that promote and support building and maintaining children's important relationships, beginning during initial licensing and placement. Regardless

<sup>3</sup> See Information Gateway's [Determining the Best Interests of the Child](#) for information about guiding principles for determining a child's best interests and State laws that discuss relevant factors to consider.

of the permanency case plan goal (e.g., reunification, adoption), foster and prospective adoptive parents must work together with families of origin to support connections.

- Practice [youth engagement](#). Help youth address their needs for maintaining connections and building relationships with their extended families before adoption has been finalized. Inform youth about contact agreements and the role of adoptive parents in helping them determine contact needs with their families of origin. (See the ["Encourage Written Contact Agreements" section](#) for more information.)
- Introduce prospective adoptive families to current adoptive families who are successfully maintaining contact after adoption so that prospective families can learn from them.
- Help adoptive families understand how they can use [social media](#) to support their children in seeking to connect with family members, including siblings, cousins, and grandparents.
- Engage fathers and paternal relatives. Birth fathers are less likely than birth mothers to have relationships with children after adoption, with 23 percent of fathers maintaining connections compared to 69 percent of mothers (Bolsby et al., 2024). There are many benefits to [father involvement](#) in a child's life, and caseworkers should make active efforts to engage and include fathers.

Child welfare professionals who work with families to support connections between children and their families of origin should

be aware of the impact adoption has on those involved. Children who have been adopted may have attachment issues because they are grieving the loss of being raised by their family of origin, among other issues. The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) offers free online training for caseworkers and other agency staff on strategies for helping families create a nurturing environment to facilitate healthy attachment and address trauma. Access the training (modules 3 and 5 are most relevant to attachment issues) on C.A.S.E.'s [Child Welfare Training Resources webpage](#).

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 families move to higher levels of engagement and more frequent or personal communication. Healthy relationships and ongoing communication work best when they are based on the wishes, strengths, and characteristics of the child and families involved.

Adoption professionals should help families of origin, adoptive families, and children 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. They should also ensure that adoption support and preservation service opportunities are available, either with the agency or through referrals, to help families build relationships and maintain connections. To learn more, see the ["Connect Adoptive and Guardianship Families With Support" section](#) of this publication.

Caseworkers may also support children who have been adopted who want to search for or contact their families of origin. See Information Gateway's factsheet [Searching for Birth Relatives](#).

### **Identify Adult Connections in a Child's Life**

The Youth Connections Scale (YCS) helps caseworkers engage children in identifying caring adults with whom they have “meaningful relationships,” as defined by the children. Developed to strengthen youths’ connections to significant adults in their lives (e.g., parents, adult siblings, relatives, foster parents, mentors, therapists), this five-part form is completed by youth with their caseworkers to help youth understand their connectedness and the importance of their emotional, financial, and social safety nets. The YCS can help caseworkers determine who a child or youth’s connections are, where these relationships can be strengthened, and what kinds of support the child or youth can expect from these relationships. Professionals can also use it to strategize ways for children to stay connected and build relationships with their families of origin.

To learn more about the YCS, visit the [Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare website](#).

### **ENCOURAGE 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 family of origin, and the child after the adoption has been finalized. These agreements range from informal, mutual understandings to written, formal contracts. 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.

There is no national standard template for written contact agreements. Some agencies, however, may have templates that agency staff are encouraged to use to collaborate 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, professionals may want to discuss social media considerations with families and consider including social media provisions in their contact agreements.

Formal contact agreements must be approved by the court or judge with jurisdiction over the adoption 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, 2018b). 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](#).

### 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 Information Gateway's [State Statutes Search](#).

### EMPHASIZE THE USE OF CONCURRENT PLANNING

Concurrent planning involves planning for multiple permanency options to reduce the amount of time a child spends in foster care. Usually, it involves pursuing reunification while also identifying an alternative permanency goal that will best serve the child's needs if reunification is not possible. Concurrent planning is based on the understanding that children benefit from maintaining connections to their families of origin, 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 if the foster parents become

the adoptive parents. Practicing concurrent planning means communicating openly and actively involving families of origin and foster families in all stages of developing permanency goals. When done well, concurrent planning strengthens and builds partnerships between families.

The following are goals of concurrent planning (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018a):

- Expediting permanency
- Minimizing a child's separation from his or her family of origin while maximizing attachment and permanent connections
- Keeping siblings together
- Empowering families of origin by involving them in alternative permanency plans when reunification is not possible
- Engaging relatives and other supportive adults in permanency planning discussions

For more information on concurrent planning, see the Information Gateway bulletin [Concurrent Planning for Timely Permanence](#).

### EXPLORE CONTACT IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTIONS

Contact between adoptive families and families of origin can be challenging 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). Social media can also play a role in intercountry adoption, enabling

children and relatives to find and contact one another online. Caseworkers should be aware of the emerging role of social media and technology in intercountry adoption reunion and seek to enhance their knowledge and skills in this evolving area (Shier, 2021).

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 families of origin. Open, honest conversations about adoption should occur early and often so that children feel comfortable sharing complicated feelings as they evolve over time. Helping children feel comfortable expressing themselves openly with their parents can deepen their attachments and support healthy development (Smith, 2015).

### **CONNECT ADOPTIVE AND GUARDIANSHIP FAMILIES WITH SUPPORT**

Families who help children maintain connections with their families of origin may need support services to help them nurture and navigate these relationships. Families may benefit from opportunities that include a mix of proactive services that prevent challenges from becoming overwhelming and services to address concerns and crises (National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support, 2025). For example, mental health services are commonly needed among children who are adopted, with one study reporting that more than 60 percent of adopted children received these services (Ringeisen et al., 2022).

To help improve child and family well-being, including the development of strong relationships, postpermanency services and programs should include the following characteristics (National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support, 2025):

- **Be available and accessible:** Programs should be available to a variety of adoptive and guardianship families, including those who adopted from foster care; families who adopted from another State, Tribe, or Territory; and families who adopted privately or through intercountry adoption. Service opportunities should be widely available in a jurisdiction, easy to find and enroll in, financially accessible, and available in a timely manner.
- **Engage families over time:** Family needs may change over time, so programs should be designed to reach and support families throughout their journey.
- **Be focused on child-parent relationships:** When adoptive parents and guardians build secure attachments and nurture their child's emotional security, the family as a whole experiences greater stability and well-being.
- **Be able to assess family outcomes:** Postpermanency service providers should gather data on general family needs, program effectiveness, and adoptions that are disrupted. This can allow sites to understand family needs, reach families in need of services, efficiently allocate resources for services, track outcomes for continuous quality improvement, and understand how changes in support affect family well-being and stability.

A common barrier to services is a lack of assistance, support, or information from the child welfare agency (Ringeisen et al., 2022). Child welfare agencies and organizations should equip staff with the skills, experience, and training necessary to provide and refer families to support service opportunities. Agencies should also collaborate with community partners who can provide critical services to support families. For more information on support services for families, see the Information Gateway bulletin [Providing Adoption Support and Preservation Services](#).

### **MEDIATE RELATIONSHIPS TO HELP FAMILIES OVERCOME POTENTIAL CHALLENGES**

Adoptive families may have conflicting feelings about helping their child maintain contact with his or her family of origin. They may want to maintain authority, be intimidated by a potential relationship between a child and the family of origin, be concerned about the stability of the family of origin, or experience logistical issues organizing in-person visits (AdoptUSKids, 2023).

Children and families may pursue [adoption search and reunion](#) through a variety of pathways, such as investigating adoption records when available, visiting a State's online adoption reunion registry, or informally searching for names and information on the internet. The availability of personal information on the internet presents a potential challenge. Although private adoption agencies may have internal policies regarding search and reunion to protect individuals' identities or establish other boundaries, families may instead use the internet to find information or try to make contact. When

possible, professionals should provide these individuals with the same level of support and education as they would those who undergo search and reunion through the agency or other formal processes.

Additionally, family needs for communicating and maintaining relationships may change over time. Families of origin 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 families of origin and adoptive families so they can better understand each other's perspectives.
- Keep 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 and refer children and families to adoption support and preservation services.

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. When they use their influence with intention and care, it can nurture strong, healthy relationships and help children understand their identity and place within their families (Stevens, 2022).

Some adoptive and guardianship families may need specific support services, such as mediation, to help them negotiate relationships with a child's family of origin and feel more comfortable working with and maintaining connections with the family. For families who need or are likely to benefit from mediation, caseworkers can refer them to a mediator who has experience with adoption. 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 locate mediation services and regional organizations offering counseling, education, and family support, visit Families Rising's [local adoption support directory](#).

### **NAVIGATE SAFETY CONCERNS**

Child safety remains one of the core tenets of the child welfare system, and in some cases, it may not be safe for a child to maintain a relationship with his or her family of origin. This may be true if the following applies:

- A caregiver is unable to maintain established relationship boundaries with a child due to mental or emotional illness.
- A caregiver has directed abuse or violence at a child, which indicates that contact would likely result in more trauma for the child.

Even when it is not safe for the child to maintain a relationship with his or her family of origin 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. Caseworkers may confer with an [adoption-competent mental health provider](#) and talk with the adoptive family to help determine the best contact options for a child (such as contact with other relatives if certain family members can't be involved in a way that is safe for the child). For more information on working with a mental health provider, see Information Gateway's [Mental and Behavioral Health webpage](#).

### **CONCLUSION**

When children who are adopted maintain relationships with their families of origin and previous caregivers, they benefit in significant ways. When safe, establishing relationships, shared decision-making, and developing contact expectations should begin before an adoption occurs, rather than after. The type and level of contact may change over time, but being connected to their family of origin can mitigate children's feelings of grief and loss, strengthen identity development, and prepare them emotionally for adulthood. It is essential for adoptive families and families of origin to prioritize the child's best interests and developmental needs by facilitating positive relationships that support safety, permanency, and well-being.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- ["Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships With Birth Families"](#) (Center for Adoption Support and Education)
- ["NTDC Classroom: Connections With Birth Families After Adoption - Facing Fears"](#) (Administration for Children and Families)

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