



# PROMOTING ONGOING ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN BIRTH FAMILIES AND ADOPTIVE FAMILIES FOLLOWING A PRIVATE DOMESTIC ADOPTION

Most of today's private domestic adoptions involve some level of openness and relationship with a child's birth family. There is a heightened need for informative and accessible resources regarding this contact, and agency workers have the unique role of discussing with adoptive families the importance of openness with the child's birth family members.



These professionals may also engage with pre-adoptive parents before placement and plan for what communication and relationship the expectant parent hopes to have with their child. Adoption professionals may be tasked with facilitating conversations between the parties leading up to the child's birth, during the post-placement period, and after adoption. Preparing adoptive parents for the potential realities of this contact will equip them with the tools necessary to foster a collaborative strategy with birth families moving forward.

## Why is contact important?

Children thrive when they achieve safety and permanency. The prospective adoptive family's role is to provide this safety and permanency if the expectant parent(s) decide to make an adoption plan for their child. In having an ongoing dialogue with their birth family, an adopted child has less ambiguity regarding various aspects of their adoption story. Dealing with feelings of grief and loss, forming a positive identity, and having access to medical history are just a few reasons why keeping in contact with a child's birth family is critical to the adoptee.

Similarly, ongoing contact benefits the birth parent(s) of the child. Birth parents also experience grief and loss relative to the relinquishment of their child and placement for adoption. Some birth parents wonder if they made the right choice. They may even feel guilt or shame about placing their child. They might harbor judgments of their family members, lose close friends, or be emotionally isolated from their support network. When there is open and honest communication between the adoptive family and their child, birth parents retain a piece of themselves. The answers to their questions, like those of adoptees, are answered without constant wondering or worrying.

## Dispelling common misconceptions about open adoption

Although open adoption is increasingly common, many families retain the belief that contact with a child's birth family can create confusion for the child or sentiments of discomfort for the birth and adoptive parents. Adoption professionals advising families on their contact preferences should convey factual information that promotes the child's best interests.



Some prospective parents think that open adoption is a co-parenting arrangement, but with the termination of the birth parent's parental rights, adoptive parents hold the same rights to their new family member that they would to a biological child. The most critical piece in navigating in an open adoption in which a birth parent has regular contact is to define the role of the birth parent in the adoptive family's life. Children can cultivate meaningful relationships with their birth parents, or other birth relatives if more appropriate, just like they can with other supportive adults in their life. For example, a birth parent may join in major celebrations or take the child out for ice cream or to the playground every month; both promote bonding and a continued relationship while centering the adoptive parents as primary caretakers.

Another area of concern for some adoptive parents is that, in inviting the birth family into an open adoption, an adoptee will struggle with feeling that their loyalty is split between two families (referred to as "split loyalty"). Adoptions where there is little to no contact with birth family leaves children to fill a void by fantasizing the life they could have led if not for adoption; most commonly, adoptees find that they must hide their split loyalty to spare their adoptive parents from being hurt. On the other hand, open adoptions show children that love is bountiful and has no numerical limitations. Adoptive parents who accept this truth and incorporate the birth family into their

lives will, maybe unknowingly, facilitate healing and lay the foundations of a support network for their adoptee.

**The birth family and adoptive family must determine what route(s) of communication to have with one another.** Below are ways that families may choose to stay in touch with each other that an agency professional can suggest:

- Letters
- Text messages
- Phone calls
- Emails
- Social media
- Video calls (FaceTime, Zoom, Skype, etc.)
- In-person visits (holiday celebrations, planned activities, etc.)
- Photo-sharing platforms

These are just some of the most common ways that adoptive families and birth families can mutually agree to a flow of contact. Agency workers may also encourage the adoptive families to brainstorm creative ways of staying in touch with their child's birth family that are not listed above. Just like there is a spectrum of openness in having contact post placement, so too is there a spectrum within the type of communication itself. Some families may have already had communication with the birth parent(s) throughout their pregnancy, while others might have less of a foundational relationship with them prior to the child's birth and placement in the adoptive home. Showing empathy and fostering a non-judgmental space for adoptive parents to express their ideas and emotions instills rapport with the adoption professional. This piece is especially pertinent if the family is to seek out support from their agency months or even years after the adoption.

**Second, engagement between the birth family and adoptive family may happen as often or as infrequently as is the agreed-upon pattern.** The frequency of contact can be one of these or something alternative:

- Annually
- Quarterly
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Daily
- Other cadences, such as bi-weekly, every other month, at the parent's discretion, or at the child/youth's discretion, when appropriate.

## Post-Adoption Contact Agreement

**A Post-Adoption Contact Agreement (PACA) is a voluntary contract entered into by the birth parents (or a birth relative, such as a grandparent, sibling, or aunt) and adoptive parents of a child *before* an adoption is finalized. This document outlines the type and frequency of communication between the parties, and in many states, PACAs are legally enforceable by one or more parties. For states in which this is the case, some may require working with a PACA mediator prior to manage modifications or resolve disputes over compliance. [State-specific statutes](#) can be helpful for prospective adoptive parents wishing to clarify the process in their place of residence.**

How regularly the birth and adoptive families maintain contact is at the discretion of either or both parties. Sticking to the created plan gives both families a consistent and predictable relationship that can always be adjusted as the child grows older. Some children may want more frequent contact with their birth family, while others might opt for less or none at all. Adoptive parents can ask for their child's input, empowering the adoptee to share their voice and be a part of discussions that affect them. Ultimately, promoting ongoing engagement with the birth family is a relationship maintained to positively benefit the child's development.

**Finally, adoptive families have some considerations in determining appropriate routes and frequencies of ongoing relationships with their adoptee's birth family.**

Adopted children thrive when there is predictability, and this includes a habitual and safe routine of communication with birth family members. Inviting in this relationship relies on commitment from both the adoptive parent(s) and the birth parent(s). Life experiences impact all relationships, and adoptive families should consider how several factors affect the where and when of ongoing and appropriate contact:

- Geographic proximity between the birth and adoptive families
- Access to a mode of personal or public transportation
- Access to a telephone, mobile phone, or computer with video calling capacity

- Flexibility of work and personal life schedules
- Age and developmental capacity of the child
- Medical or special needs rendering high levels of services or supports
- Substance misuse left undiagnosed, untreated, or that impacts interpersonal functioning
- Mental health conditions left undiagnosed, untreated, or that impact daily functioning

This preliminary list outlines disparities in access to services, medical or mental health needs, or the physical distance between families that may limit which kind of contact transpires. It is not meant to be all-inclusive but rather, it should paint a picture of possibilities that agency workers can gently incorporate into their work with adoptive families. Identifying which realities are applicable will bolster adoptive and birth families with grounded, reasonable expectations of their openness following the private domestic placement and finalization of adoption.

It should be noted that in some instances, there are seasons where contact with birth family may not be safe for the child. If a birth parent is dealing with substance misuse and is unable to follow through with visits, then it is in the child's best interest to explain in an age-appropriate way the "why" of the circumstance. An adoptive parent might say to their 10-year-old child, "Sarah, your birth mom is making poor decisions about drinking alcohol right now, and too much alcohol can make following a schedule hard for her. That is why we cannot have a visit this month." Offer emotional validation to the child as well as choices of communication that keep the child safe. For example, messaging and sending a picture of the child (that they approve to be taken and sent) to the birth parent could be a safe resolution to putting in-person visits on hold. Remember, safety is *always* the priority of any relationship but especially in preserving a lasting one between birth and adoptive families. It may also be that



when a birth parent is not able to have visits, other members of the birth family (such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) can engage with the adoptee and the adoptive family.

## In Conclusion

Agency workers supporting families navigating their private domestic adoption journey should prioritize conversations about open contact between the adoptive family and birth family. Centering the adoptee as the beneficiary of this relationship can ease the hesitations of some prospective adoptive parents. Once the child is placed and later adopted, agency workers interfacing with the family can continue to initiate discussion and encourage adoptive parents to collaborate with birth parents.

## Additional Resources

To learn more, check out these resources, which can be found in the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library, at <https://postadoptioncenter.org>:

- [Maintaining and Strengthening Birth Family Relationships Post-Placement](https://postadoptioncenter.org)
- [Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships with Birth Families - National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support \(postadoptioncenter.org\)](https://postadoptioncenter.org)
- [The Post-Adoption Life: Supporting Adoptees, Birth Parents, and Families After Adoption. Adoption Advocate No. 78 - National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support \(postadoptioncenter.org\)](https://postadoptioncenter.org)

**To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library:**

[www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library](http://www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library)



This project is supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$4,000,000 with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit the ACF website, [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/administrative-and-national-policy-requirements#book\\_content\\_7](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/administrative-and-national-policy-requirements#book_content_7).