

Adopters as Custodians of Children's Connections

Safe and meaningful connections with birth family members

The custodian role includes:

Understanding who in the child's birth family is significant to them, and anyone else, and nurturing those relationships



Speaking warmly and respectfully about birth family members and significant others



Understanding that these relationships are important



Finding out what the child thinks and feels about Staying in Touch* and helping them to communicate their preferences around how they want to do this



* Staying in Touch is the preferred term for the various ways that adopted children can continue to maintain a connection with birth family and significant others

When children are adopted, maintaining safe and meaningful relationships with their birth family members / significant others can be complex and challenging but it's important not to give up and disconnect.

Children who are disconnected from birth family members / significant others can feel grief, rejection, curiosity and a yearning to know more about them. Without efforts to mend relationships, the distress of disconnection can become intergenerational.

Meaningful family relationships can help children heal from emotional trauma and develop a strong sense of who they are.

Adopters are the custodians of children's connections to their family members and significant others throughout their childhood.

Adopters need to hold these connections so they can be passed on to the child and they can carry those relationships with them over their lifespan.

The custodian role includes:

Honouring and celebrating these relationships including displaying photos



Sharing special photos (if agreed) and stories about the child with birth family members/ significant others. And as they get older, that they would like to share



Committing to a routine for keeping siblings in touch that matches their changing needs



Keeping the lines of communication open so that as the child gets older, they have the option to pursue these relationships for themselves



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Safer meaningful connections with birth family or significant others

Why is maintaining connections with birth family and significant others important for children?

Staying in Touch* meet-ups or Letterbox exchanges are just two of the ways adopted children can build or maintain relationships with their birth family members or other significant people in their lives. These relationships are important for many reasons:

To **understand their past** and reasons why they were adopted

To **work through feelings** of grief, loss or denial and reach a sense of resolution

To **reassure the child** about how family members or significant others are, and that they are thinking about them

Research tells us that children need to feel they belong to both of their families and that they don't have to choose between them. Remember every child has unique circumstances and any risks posed to children around staying in touch need to be effectively managed.

IF adopters don't actively support children's relationships with their birth families

IF the child's physical and emotional safety isn't being supported

To **build strong connections** with family members (including parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles) or significant others

To **build their sense of trust** in others and capacity to sustain future relationships

To **develop a cohesive sense of identity** that integrates their origins with their birth family

To **restore a relationship** so that past issues can be addressed

IF children know that their adopted and birth families can't accept that they can both have important roles to play in the child's life

IF birth families have difficulty coming to terms with their child being adopted

A consistent message from research is that children need a good sense of identity and that Staying in Touch* meet-ups and/or other regular meaningful communication can be an important way for that to happen.

Staying connected can be challenging:

Professionals can support carers to build positive relationships with the child's family

Don't give up. Seek support to keep relationships going as the long term benefits can outweigh the challenges

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