

contact after adoption

Planning and supporting contact in open
adoption: Implications of UK research for NSW
practice

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What do adopted children need?

- Security, love and to 'belong' in their new family
- Knowledge of their birth family, their personal history and 'why' they needed to be adopted
- To manage feelings of loss and separation
- To make sense of being in more than one family
- To recover from early harm

Adoption of children from care in England

- Compulsory adoption when court thresholds are met – but one of a range of permanence options
- About 4,600 children from care are adopted; most (75%) are under age 5
- Post-adoption contact must be ‘considered’
- Most contact plans are voluntary – court orders are available but rarely used
- Most children have indirect rather than direct contact
- Services to support contact must be provided

Some research on adoption at UEA

- The 'contact after adoption' study (2015)– 18 year longitudinal study of adopters, adopted children/young people and birth relatives
- The 'supporting direct contact' study (2011): focussed on agency mediated direct contact: involved agencies, adopters and birth relatives
- The Yorkshire & Humberside survey of adoptive families (online questionnaire 330 adoptive families – 2017)

Contact: respecting children's links to birth and adoptive families

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Every family is different

Contact works when relationships work

Support must be available

Every family is
different

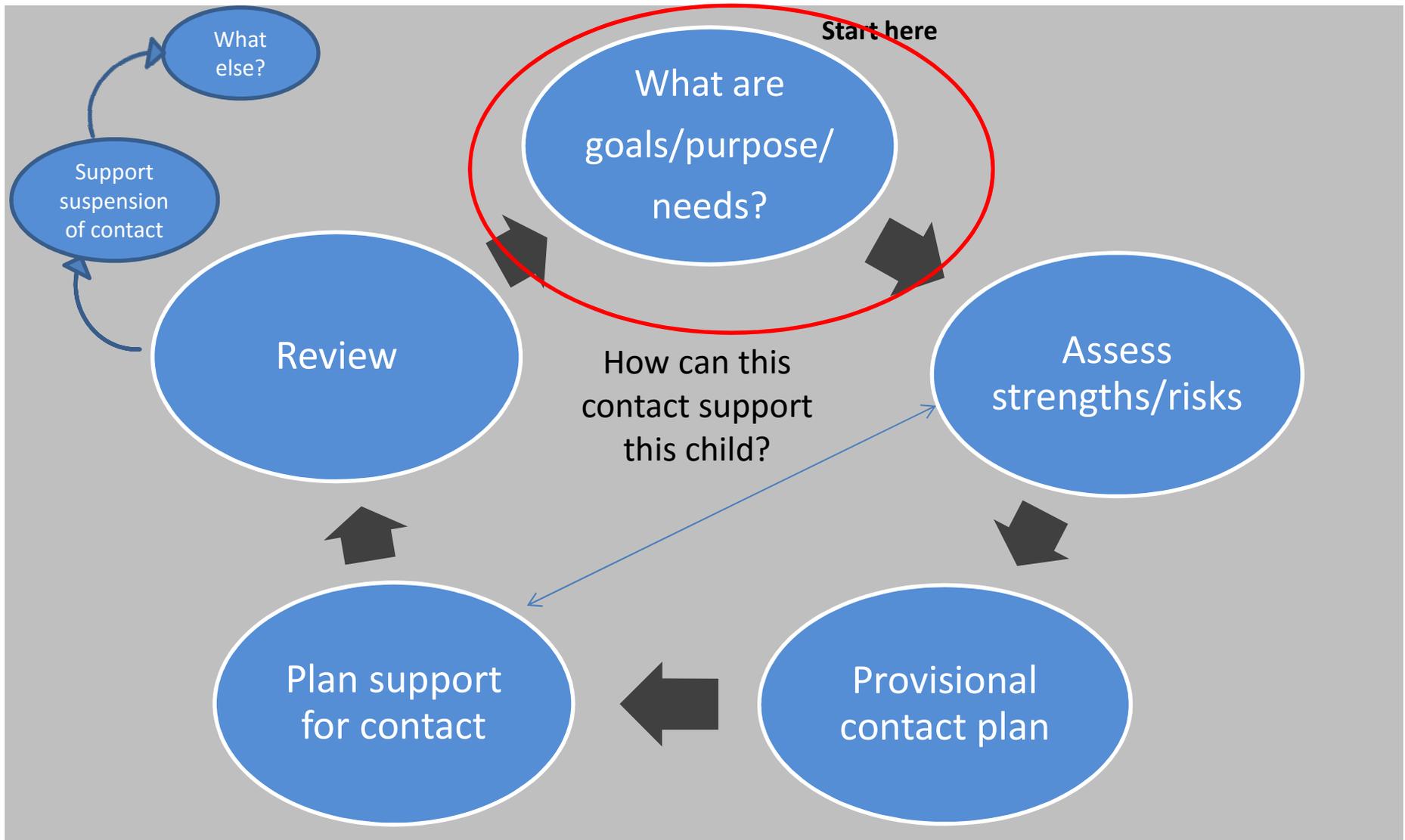
Key findings: impact of contact on children

- Overall development of child determined by other factors more than by contact
- Identity development assisted by contact, but openness of adopters vitally important
- The balance of benefits and challenges varies from case-to-case and over time

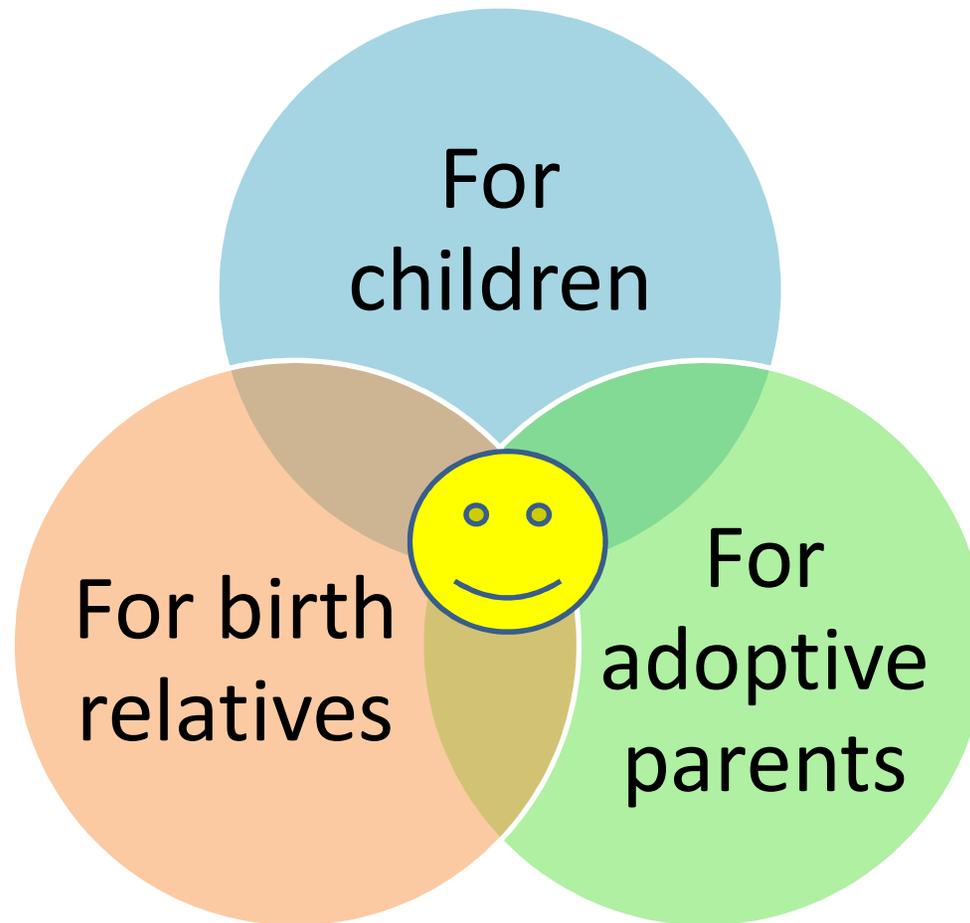
Contact pathways over time (Neil et al, 2015)

- Many contact arrangements 'fell by the wayside'
 - 1/3 of YP had lost all contact by age 18
- Contact with *parents* least enduring
- Indirect contact less enduring than face-to-face
- Reductions often driven by wishes of adopters or child; some birth relatives had died
- Some increases in contact in adolescence, including though social media

Practice model: contact in permanent placements



Setting goals: what benefits do you hope will be achieved?



Potential benefits for adoptive parents

- Understanding/learning about birth family
- Helping them communicate with their child
- Managing anxieties: *"For me, a mother popping up out of the blue would feel very threatening...I don't have that threat because we already have that relationship with her."*
- Bringing them closer to their child: *"I think it actually makes them feel more part of our family... Every contact we come away feeling more secure really...more certain that they need us as parents and that they are our children"*

Potential benefits for birth relatives

- Reassurance about the child mitigates feelings of loss and guilt: *“I know she is very happy where she is and that makes me happy”*
- Being about to still contribute something to the child: *“The children need this contact...to help them adjust to what has happened in their lives...we feel they just need the reassurance of knowing that their birth family is still there and care about them”*
- Maintaining a valued relationship: *“I just enjoy every moment, every time I see them...I love having contact”*

Young people's satisfaction with openness (Neil et al, 2015)

- Satisfaction with contact varied within all levels openness; it was associated with contact quality/stability more than type
- Dissatisfaction often associated with gaps in contact
- Most saw some benefits in having contact and argued that the option should be there:

“Even if the contact is only brief... I think social workers should ensure that the option of staying in contact is always left open”

Jon and Carrie

Jon: adopted age 2

- Both parents had serious mental illness
- In foster care from birth; visited by birth father
- Face-to face-contact with birth father facilitated by adopters
- Jon has experienced mental health difficulties

Carrie: adopted age 1

- Birth mother very young and had little support
- Had direct contact with birth mum and grandmother; letters with paternal grandmother
- Birth mum married and had a daughter – included in contact

Benefits of contact for adopted young people

Information Needs

Relationships

Openness in Adoptive Family

Challenges of contact for adopted young people

Emotional strain

Managing loss

Unanswered questions

Assessing strengths & risks: children

Relationship history

Nature of current relationship with birth relative

Wishes & feelings

Age & development

Contact works when relationships work

Contact involves complex feelings & interpersonal dynamics

- The nature of contact meetings may not be comfortable or 'family like': *"Maybe if I went to their house it might be different. I'd probably get to know them better."* (birth grandparent)
- Everyone's emotions can be running high: *"I get anxious about it... it's probably the fact that it is reiterating that I'm not his birth mum. (adoptive mother)"*
- Relationships are both intimate and distant: *"I still feel like they think they know me and I don't feel like I know them. I felt a lot of pressure when meeting them"* (adopted young person)

Relationships between children and their birth relatives (Neil et al, 2011)

- Siblings: differences in age, placement, history, lifestyle, views of birth parents
- Not having up to date knowledge of the child and fear of overstepping boundaries (birth relative perspective)
- Lack of ability to relate appropriately to child (adoptive parent perspective)

Sometimes mum and dad overpower her and want to pick her up and want to touch her and she backs off, because she doesn't always remember who they are.
(Adopter)

[Birth mum] has got quite a rapport with him...she does come down to his level, she'll get down on the ground and play a game and he will enjoy that.
(Adopter)

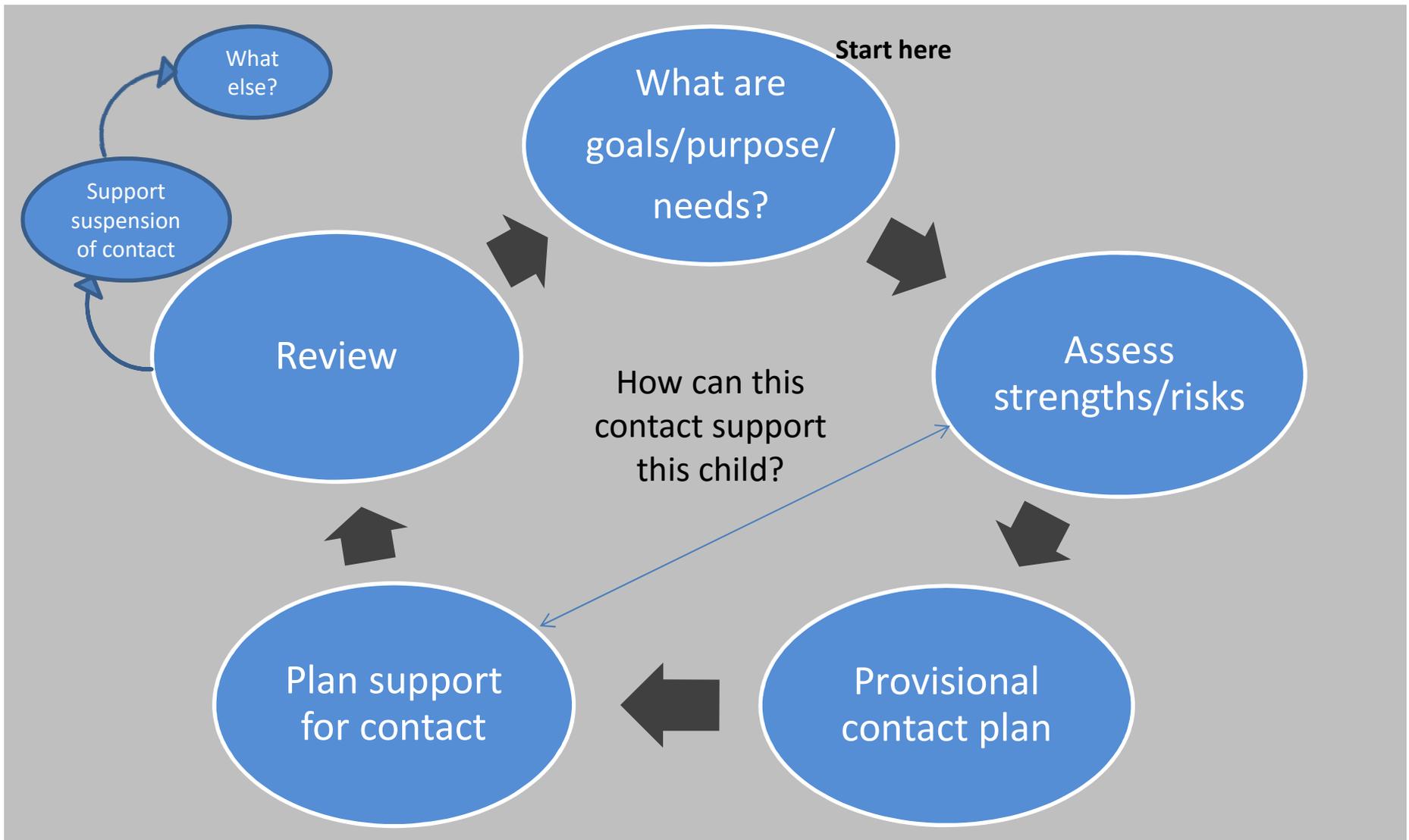
The children were running about and doing different things and you felt as if the [adoptive] family was the family and you were the outsiders
(Birth grandmother)

Assessing strengths/risks: adults

- Adoptive parents: respect and promote child's connections to birth family
- Birth relatives: respect and promote child's connections to adoptive family
- Commitment to contact and willingness to 'work at it'
- These characteristics vary between people but also over time – may be lowest at pre-adoption stage

Support must be
available

Planning and supporting contact after adoption



When can families manage contact themselves

- Confident, resourceful, communicatively open adoptive parents
- Birth relatives who have stable lives and who are accepting of the adoption
- No significant risk management issues
- Child reacts positively to contact
- Even so, what if circumstances change?

What happens when needed support isn't available?

- Risky contact – may be harmful to child
- Unsatisfactory contact – people start to withdraw, sometimes causing further loss and pain and/or undermining understanding and trust
- Young people or birth relatives try to find their own solutions to unmet needs – social media – can be risky when unsupported

Where contact may destabilise placements

- Traumatic/abuse neglect (Howe and Steele, 2004)
- Continued lack of support for placement by birth relatives (Neil et al, 2011)
- Too high frequency – new family unable to function as ‘family’ (Neil, Beek and Schofield, 2003)
- Behavioural/emotional problems of child following contact put too much stress on family (Mackaskill, 2002)

How do social workers support contact? (Neil et al 2011, 2015)

Good practice

- Child's needs come first, but adults' needs also addressed
- Support with emotions and relationships
- Proportionate risk management

Problems in supporting contact

- Needs of one or more parties (esp. birth relatives) not addressed
- Disproportionate risk management
- Contact 'supervised' not facilitated: it may be 'safe' but not 'happy'

Contact: respecting children's links to birth and adoptive families

Every family is different



Case-by-case decision making

Contact works when relationships work



Understanding the dynamics of contact

Support must be available



Assess who needs help and provide this!

Thank you! For more information....

- Online practice resources: <http://contact.rip.org.uk/>
- The 'Contact after Adoption' study
<https://www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption/home>

Neil, E., Beek, M., and Ward, E. (2015) *Contact After Adoption: A longitudinal study of post-adoption contact arrangements*. CoramBAAF.

- 'Helping Birth Families' and 'Supporting Direct Contact after Adoption' studies
<http://www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/study5.html>

Neil, E., Cossar, J., Jones, C., Lorgelly, P., & Young, J. (2011). *Supporting direct contact after adoption*. BAAF.

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