



Family Connections and Contact Study: Practices to support families



A birth mother shows her new blended family - herself, children at home & in care & their carers

Study context & overview

Reforms to out-of-home-care (OOHC) in New South Wales (NSW) include policy and practice changes to prioritise guardianship and open adoption over long-term foster care. With this comes an expectation on carers to take over contact arrangements without agency support.

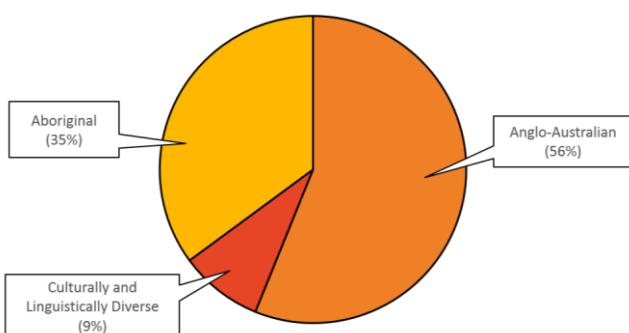
There was a need for evidence about what agency and casework practices help families to make contact a meaningful and enriching part of children's lives and what gets in the way.

We conducted a study to explore the perspectives of families involved in contact between May and August 2018

Fifty-seven participants from four regions of NSW took part in the study including 12 birth parents, 19 children and young people and 26 carers.

This summary focuses on the implications for casework practice that emerged from the study.

Cultural background of participants



Institute of Open Adoption Studies
Sydney School of Education & Social Work
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences

Impact of reforms

As a result of the permanency reforms, a third of participants (N=19) were actively pursuing a move from kinship care to guardianship or from foster care to open adoption. Some of these carers still needed agency support to build a relationship with birth parents. Caseworkers could play an active role in assisting birth parents to reliably attend contact and understand the legal changes.

Caseworker role in fostering relationships between adults:

- Organise an initial meeting to help carers and birth families move from uncertainty and fear to optimism and collaboration around the child's needs.
- Model respectful communication before, during and after contact visits in speaking with and about both parties.
- Foster empathy so carers understand birth parent's feelings and can diffuse conflict and create safety.
- Encourage consensus on exchange of information so it becomes routine and normalised.



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Support for communication

Training for caseworkers can help them to develop core skills for communicating with carers and birth parents to help build engagement.

Carer training can also play a role in fostering empathy based and trauma informed skills, including active listening.

Carers and birth parents often need help to learn the skills to express concerns and difficult feelings in appropriate ways.

Caseworkers have a valuable role in establishing processes with both parties for exchanging information. Clear and agreed ground rules help address problems before they become insurmountable.

Practice examples:

- Encourage carers to help children to acknowledge parent birthdays and mothers/fathers' days
- Suggest ways to symbolise children's connection two families such as photo displays at home.
- Help birth parents to acknowledge positive changes in the child, and accept the carer's parental authority in front of children.
- Help carers to understand the children's birth family circumstances and explain birth parent behaviour in the context of trauma and grief.

Support to overcome barriers

Contact often involves complicated logistics, including when birth families are large and siblings not placed together. Deliberate efforts to create plans that are realistic and practical can avoid children and carers feeling overwhelmed by arrangements.

Families in regional areas can face challenges related to geography. Children may have to travel long distances to see family which can impact on everyday life for them and carers. Incorporating contact visits into carer holidays or having less frequent but longer visits can overcome this.

Tension between carers and birth parents is likely to occur when children resist or are distressed by contact. Empathic and sensitive casework can prevent permanent damage to children's family relationships.



A birth mother depicts her wish to be seen & heard by carers and caseworkers at contact

For Aboriginal children living off Country, distance could have potential implications for their cultural identity. Even if kinship carers were sensitive to keeping children connected to birth parents and Country, family dynamics could undermine this. Helping adults to focus on ways to reconnect children to culture could also help to re-establish family relationships.

For more information about the study visit

<https://goo.gl/Kkr3kg>