

NAS brief contact planning guidance

Making good decisions regarding contact for children with a plan for adoption

Planning contact for children with a plan for adoption needs to start as early as possible, but should keep in mind the child's longterm needs not just their current situation.

This template and guidance notes are designed to be used alongside the comprehensive guidance in the [NAS Good Practice Guides](#), especially that on [Contact](#) along with 'Working with Birth Parents' and 'Adoption Support' and the accompanying NAS contact planning tool. It is intended that it will be used to aid planning and decision making at the point when permanence options are first considered for a child.

An underlying principle is, 'Planning contact for children in permanent placement is a dynamic process, rather than a one-off event' (Neil, 2015).

The original [planning tool](#) on which this is based can be downloaded from the '[Contact After Adoption](#)' open access section of the Research in Practice website, which provides detailed information and guidance on the use of the model, with case study examples, alongside a wealth of other resources for practitioners and references to the research on which it is based.

The template is based on a 5-step model developed by Professor Elsbeth Neil and Polly Baynes independent social worker and trainer. It is informed by the available research on what determines the success or otherwise of contact.

- **Step 1: Consider what the purpose of contact is for this child.**
- **Step 2: Identify the strengths and risks for each person involved.**
- **Step 3: Devise a provisional contact plan in relation to each person with a significant connection to the child.**
- **Step 4: Develop a provisional support plan for all those involved to help ensure that contact is meaningful and can be sustained.**
- **Step 5: Review the plan when changes are needed or in response to a request from one of those involved.**

The authors emphasise that, '*Although contact plans are for children they are enacted by adults and may be helped or hindered by relationships between them and the support that does (or does not) exist*'.

The aim of the template is to ensure that those involved in planning for post adoption contact reflect on the long-term implications and the need to review the arrangement as the child develops and circumstances change over time. It avoids solely focussing on eliminating all risk in contact arrangements, which is not possible. An approach just based on risk avoidance has limitations:

- Undue weight may be placed on potential risks which are not balanced with likely long-term benefits for the adopted person in terms of their identity.
- It is based on a snapshot of the situation at a specific moment in time and ignores the possibility of change.
- Success or otherwise of contact is affected by the characteristics and needs of all concerned over time e.g., the child, the adoptive parents, birth relatives and others.
- There may be insufficient consideration of the critical importance of meeting the support needs of all concerned and how these may change.

It is hoped that practitioners will find this tool useful in providing a logical, stepwise process to assess the contact needs of children and provide a rationale for contact planning, which is based on reputable research evidence.

As a starting point, contact should be considered for all the people who are or have been significant to the child e.g., those who might be included in the child's Life Journey Work

Step One: What are this child's current and possible future needs in relation to contact?

Consider which of the following needs for this child may be met by each of the people above?

- Build or maintain relationships.
- Assure child they are loved and remembered.
- Ease the pain of separation and loss.
- Give permission to settle in a new family.
- Support reparation and recovery after abuse.
- Provide a reality check.
- Reassure that birth relatives are alive and well.
- Help children to understand their history and identity (particularly for black and ethnic minority children).
- Support life story work and allow children to ask questions about why they do not live with birth parents.

Baynes and Neil, (2015)

Direct and remote as well as indirect contact should always be considered wherever possible, but if direct or remote contact is not considered safe with any of the people identified at this time, how else can these needs be met?

Initial meetings

A well supported face to face meeting between prospective adopters and birth family, wherever possible, is often a good way to start to build trust and empathy, which are the foundations for meaningful and sustained contact of any type. These meetings should be the default option and should not be discounted without good reasons. Flexibility over the timing of such meetings can be helpful to avoid times of extreme stress and anxiety for all concerned and maximise the chances of a positive outcome.

Step two: What are the strengths and risks?

Consider the current strengths and risks in relation to each person involved before formulating a provisional contact plan. The characteristics of prospective adopters will need to be considered at the linking and matching stage, when the plan may be reviewed.

The following are factors are shown from research to be associated with either beneficial or detrimental contact). Bear in mind that contact is hoped to continue throughout childhood and while these may be predictive factors, based on the experience of contact at the point of planning some may have changed at the point of linking/matching and may change again subsequently, requiring a review of the contact plan.

Factors in relation to the child

STRENGTHS	RISKS
Factors in the child associated with positive contact:	Factors in the child associated with difficult or disruptive contact:
Child placed in infancy.	Older child with troubled/traumatic relationship with birth relative.
No pre-placement relationship with birth relative.	Rejected child, lived with several birth relatives.
Positive/neutral pre-placement relationship.	Major behavioural/mental health problems.
Absence of major behavioural/mental health problems.	Insecure attachment/placement with current carers.
Secure attachment and placement with current carers.	Child freely does not want contact, is afraid.
Healthy psycho-social development.	Child is fearful on return to placement/trust in carers undermined.
Child freely wants contact, is not afraid.	Child has negative memories.
Child has positive memories.	Child is re-traumatised/overwhelmed by contact.
Child has not witnessed/does not imitate violence.	Child witnessed violence/imitates violence.

Factors in relation to adult birth relatives'

STRENGTHS	RISKS
Factors in the birth mother associated with positive contact:	Factors in the birth mother associated with difficult or disruptive contact:
Has never been child's primary carer.	Does not accept or undermines the placement.
Accepts and supports placement, affirms new carers.	Insists on maintaining role as main carer, discourage child from loving new family.
Constructive and collaborative approach.	Seriously maltreated or traumatised child in past (including exposure to domestic violence).
Relinquishes parenting role.	Neglectful/abusive/rejecting during visits.
Relates to child in positive, non-abusive way.	Unreliable, persistently late.
Relatively free of significant personal difficulties (for example substance misuse).	Denies causing harm/shows no remorse or regret.
Reliable, punctual.	Exposes child to values at odds with placement (for example drug use).
Accepts harm caused to child.	Significant personal difficulties (for example substance misuse).
Expresses regret/remorse.	Uses contact to undermine/threaten/cause conflict with carers.
Does not use contact to undermine/threaten or cause conflict with carers.	Risk to carers/threats of abduction.

Siblings

If there is guidance from any sibling relationship/attachment assessments carried out during proceedings, this should be given significant weight. However, decisions about whether or not to place siblings together or separately are not synonymous with decisions regarding post adoption contact, irrespective of the situation for each child e.g., remaining with birth family, CLA, in residential care, SGO, adopted by another family, independent living. Consideration will also be needed at a later stage in relation to siblings born subsequently based on the situation at that time.

If no sibling contact is proposed, why has this decision been made?

Factors in relation to Sibling(s)

STRENGTHS	RISKS
Factors associated with positive sibling contact:	Factors associated with difficult or detrimental sibling contact:
Activity-based, chance to build up good memories.	Child is re-traumatised or recovery impaired by contact.
Carers from similar backgrounds, with similar values.	Siblings discourage child from loving/ settling in with new family.
Placements are geographically close.	Chains of contact present a risk.
	Negative patterns re-emerge (for example sexualised behaviour/scapegoating) despite intervention.
	Sibling cannot relinquish parental role.

Step 3 to 5: Provisional contact plan

Having used the Steps 1 and 2 to inform your planning, draw up the contact plan, to form part of the CAR B (before linking/matching). It may be reviewed during the matching process and incorporated into the APR/Adoption Support plan. Following placement, it may be reviewed again as part of Adoption Reviews.

Step 4: Provisional Contact Support Plan

Appropriate support for all those involved in contact is critical to maximise the benefits for the child and ensure that it can be sustained over time.

Step 5: Review of contact plan post adoption

This should consider everybody's point of view, paying particular attention to children's response before and after visits and their demeanour during contact as well as verbally expressed wishes.

Having considered this guidance, please complete the [contact planning tool](#) for a specific child.