

Top tips for adoptive parents regarding contact

1. It's up to you to decide.....You are now your child's legal as well as psychological (ie 'everyday') parent, you know them best and it's your right and responsibility to make decisions about contact in the light of what you feel is best for them.
2. Nothing is written in stone....contact arrangements need to be flexible and capable of changing over time to match the changing needs of your growing child. Whatever the contact arrangements agreed at the time of the adoption hearing, these may (and probably will) need to change as time passes. It might be helpful if you can write something about this to help the birth relatives understand the reasons for change but don't be afraid to ask the Letterbox coordinator to deal with this on your behalf – it's part of the service offered!
3. Don't be over-alarmed by anyone who mentions legal action if you change contact arrangements. Despite what many birth relatives (and adopters) believe, birth relatives do not have an automatic right to take contact issues back to court once an order has been made – they only have the right to ask a solicitor to seek the leave of the court to have the matter considered. In practice this has not been tested much. Also, the traditional view of the courts is that they are keen to support adoptive families and wary of anything that may destabilise them. However, if you wish to change contact arrangements it is important that you are able to describe why you feel the change is necessary in terms of your child's welfare and best interests. It is also a good idea to outline the contact arrangements which you feel would be helpful and manageable rather than simply saying what you're no longer able or willing to do. It is probably even more important to do this when the contact is with siblings rather than adult birth relatives. Again, the Letterbox coordinator can provide advice and can also mediate with the birth relatives.
4. Remember that involving your child in their Letterbox is not the same thing as delegating responsibility to them. Whilst you will probably want to offer your child the chance to be more actively involved as they grow older (and especially once they get into their teens), Letterbox is essentially meant to be something which adoptive parents manage on behalf of their child, in the same way as they take overall responsibility for so many other things in life. It's never a good idea to badger children/teenagers to write – if they can't/don't actually get down to it, maybe it's a signal that they still need you to take responsibility on their behalf?
5. Even if your child is writing something him/herself, it's still a very good idea to send a couple of lines from you – even if it's just something like 'Hope you enjoy reading Jenny's letter. We're all well and hope you are too. Best wishes, Sue and John'. Maintaining a 'presence' within Letterbox underlines for the birth relative the fact that the Letterbox exchange is taking place under your supervision and because you think it is helpful for your child. Our experience over the years has underlined the importance of doing this and not

encouraging birth relatives to see the exchange of letters as directly and solely between themselves and the child who has been adopted.

6. Evaluating the impact of contact (indirect or direct) on a child is not always easy. Just because the child doesn't show much interest in, for example, letters doesn't always mean they are indifferent to the contact, that it doesn't hold any meaning for them. Just because contact is unsettling doesn't necessarily mean it is unhelpful for the child – some parents have told us how the unsettledness around contact can act as a springboard towards growth and healing and can help deepen parent-child attachments. Once again, it may be helpful to talk things through with someone else.