



# Family Connections & Contact Study Summary



A birth mother depicts her new blended family - herself, her children living at home and in care, and their carers

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

***Families who had transformed contact from an obligation into family time that was rewarding for the child and their families showed a positive attitude, willingness to share power and openness to change.***

## Contact and Connection

In Australia, most children in out-of-home-care have contact with birth relatives even in permanent care. Contact helps children to maintain relationships, a sense of security and identity with Kin and culture.

### About the study

There are changes underway in to improve permanency for children in out-of-home-care in New South Wales. After restoration, guardianship and open adoption are now the preferred permanency options over long-term foster care. This will mean that families are responsible for making contact arrangements without agency support.

The study explored what makes contact work for children and young people, carers, and birth families. Children need help from adults to stay connected to their families and if contact does not work for adults it is harder for children to have a positive experience. The study explored how carers and birth parents build respectful relationships and learn to overcome problems and what part caseworkers play in supporting children's ongoing family connections.

### Key findings

The study found that how carers, birth parents and caseworkers interacted played a big part in whether contact was a positive or negative experience for children. Attributes such as empathy, tolerance and openness helped create trust between adults but could take time to build.

### Factors that emerged were:

- Caseworkers play an important role in providing emotional support and facilitating a bond between birth parents and carers.
- Birth parents and carers agreed that good communication between them was key to promoting healthy interactions with children.
- Carers and birth parents often came from different worlds and gaining empathy for each other was not always easy but went a long way toward healing the past and avoiding future misunderstandings.
- When contact goes well, it helps children to preserve and strengthen family connections, recover from grief and loss, and feel secure.
- Contact helps Aboriginal children, or those from a different cultural background to their carers, stay connected to their community, culture, religion and language.
- Birth parents often had a history of childhood trauma and felt sorrow and pain that they had not been able to be the parent they wanted.
- The trauma of child removal and distressing experiences of supervised contact with their children have a lasting effect on birth parents.
- Early life experiences may lead to behavioural problems in children before, during or after contact.
- Children were affected when there was bad feeling between carers and birth parents even if they were not directly involved.



## Why the study was needed

Previous research and consultation by the Institute showed that contact was a challenge for caseworkers and carers. Carers saw managing contact as highly skilled and worried about safeguarding the child and dealing with problems with birth relatives. Lack of confidence led many to avoid being involved in contact or to take on a more independent role.

## Study methods

Qualitative interviews and arts-based methods were used to elicit the perspectives of children and young people, birth parents and carers including guardians or kinship carers, adoptive parents and long-term foster carers. The study examined views and experiences of contact and hopes for future relationships with children and family members. Discussion topics encompassed what contact meant and what it was like for them, what support they needed, preferences and hopes, and how to include children's views in contact plans.

The research was conducted in Sydney, the Illawarra and Hunter regions, and central western NSW. Participants were recruited with the assistance of NSW Family and Community Services (FACS) non-government organisations (NGOs) and community groups.

Advocacy groups also supported recruitment through their social media networks, and one parent advocate co-facilitated data collection with birth parents.

## Research questions:

- What is the experience of contact for children, birth parents and permanent carers in New South Wales?
- What helps children's birth and permanent families with the transition from agency-supervised to carer facilitated contact?
- What influences relationship building between children's birth and permanent families?



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

## Who took part?

Fifty-seven participants from the four NSW regions took part in the study including:

- 12 birth parents
- 26 carers
- 19 children and young people.

Twenty participants identified as Aboriginal\*. A focus group was held with 10 young people aged 12-16 years and three of their younger siblings (under 12 years).

*\*In recognition of Aboriginal people as the original inhabitants of NSW, this document refers specifically to Aboriginal people and communities.*

## Metropolitan

Children and young people



Carers



Birth mothers



Key

----- Dyad

## Regional

Children and young people



Carers



Birth mothers



Key

----- Dyad



## Evidence about contact benefits & challenges

When contact goes well, it helps children to preserve and strengthen family connections, recover from grief and loss, and feel secure.

Children gain valuable information and insight into their family history and why they entered care. Knowing that their families are safe and still care can help them come to terms with their loss. Regular contact can also sustain important relationships with siblings and grandparents.

Contact can help children from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, or who have a different cultural background to their carers, to stay connected to their community, culture, religion and language.

Research also shows that supervised contact is associated with less well-developed relationships between birth parents and carers than carer-facilitated contact.

If the relationships between the adults connected to children in care are not working, it is unlikely that contact will be positive and safe for children.

## What makes contact difficult

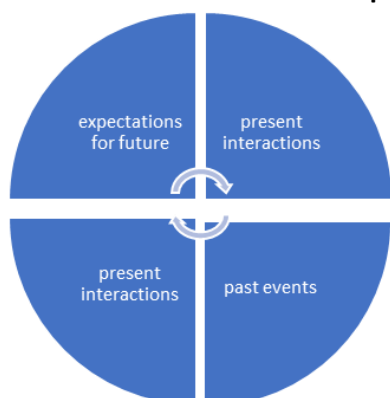
Respect between the adults and a focus on the child is key to making contact work for everyone.

Foster carers and birth parents trying to forge new relationships under strained and challenging circumstances may have little in common.

Kinship carers and birth parents may have existing dynamics and fragile family relationships could make it hard to create a positive space for contact.

Birth parents' ability to maintain a relationship with their children was influenced by agency processes and caseworker and carer attitudes.

## Evolution of contact relationships



## Children and contact

Having contact with birth parents may be a highly charged experience for children, due to a history of trauma or disrupted attachment. Children can exhibit behaviour that challenges carers and birth parents before, during and after contact. This inevitably strains relationships between adults.

If contact had to be suspended due to a child's severe distress, it was critical that birth parents were consulted and alternative strategies, such as regular phone contact, were used to maintain the connection. Creativity and sensitivity by carers could reassure birth parents they were not to blame. This showed birth parents that they were respected and that it was necessary to put the child's needs first.



Child's representation of close relationships with carers and some birth family members, using figurines. Siblings living elsewhere are depicted as being less close.

## Evolution of relationships between adults

Contact relationships have a natural trajectory. Regardless of how long a child had been in care, the natural starting point for relationships based around contact was when that child was removed (*the past*) and interactions around this event influenced fledgling relationships between carers and birth parents (*the present*). The way carers and birth parents dealt with obstacles impacted on the expectations for contact (*the future*).

The long shadow of the past was particularly notable in the interactions of birth parents with their child's carer and the agency responsible for the placement. Child removal, past encounters with child protection, and childhood adversity all shaped the current relationships birth parents had with carers and workers.

# Family Connections and Contact Study

## Building connections: The role of caseworkers

There was significant variation in how carers and birth parents in the study got to know each other. The nature of their early interactions and timing of their first meeting were determined by factors outside their control. Some carers felt they had been kept away from birth parents and saw this as a missed opportunity. Many birth parents only saw carers at an annual case plan meeting, which was a formal setting facilitated by the agency and did not offer the chance for relaxed, casual conversation.

**Caseworkers** play a pivotal role in determining if and how the adults involved got to know each other:

- Agency-supervised contact tended to prevent relationships from forming organically. Some carers reported not knowing the reason for supervision but others understood it was an agency policy or was to manage risk.
- Birth parents who had supervised contact resented the formality it brought to the arrangement and wanted agency involvement in contact diminished.

**Caseworkers** can help families forge a positive connection by working with each person behind the scenes to build understanding and empathy.

- Birth parents and carers often had to overcome fears about how they were perceived, feelings of awkwardness, or uncertainties about their role in the child's life. Carers worried that they may be the target of birth parents' anger and distress about the loss of their child.
- Adults who had been able to get to know each other expressed having a sense of relief after they met because it demystified the other person in their mind, relieved the tension and fear and enabled them to see each other as people.

## Common features of high quality contact

The common features in contact that was high quality and enjoyable for children were:

- **Clear boundaries** – about what to expect at contact, including who would be present and what behaviour was acceptable.
- **Positive connections** – involving birth relatives in child-centred activities and interactions.

- **Predictability** – so children know it will happen and are involved in planning their next visit.
- **Special time** – for children to reconnect meaningfully with birth relatives in a safe, comfortable settings for both parties. It should involve activities that children and young people enjoy and offer adults a chance to interact with them. Age-appropriate and free activities, such as nature parks or playgrounds with equipment can avoid excessive cost barriers.



*A birth mother depicts her heart's desire being to spend more time with her four children*

## Forging new blended families

Carers and children talked about wanting to have a normal family despite it being forged from two unrelated families. Some families were able to transform contact from a legal requirement into a chance for children to spend enjoyable time with family. This took a shift in attitudes, a willingness to cooperate and openness to change. Birth parents needed to accept the change in their parenting role and carers needed to accept that birth parents would continue to have a legitimate and emotional investment in their children.

Symbolic actions that fostered connection included carers displaying photos of birth family at home and birth parents reinforcing the carer's rules.

Adults who approached the future in a positive manner identified as having created a new family entity that blended carer and birth families. They recognised and accepted the child's connections to both families as equal but different.

For more information about the study

visit <https://goo.gl/Kkr3kg>



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