

## **Sibling contact within adoption - 10 Top Tips for Placing Siblings, BAAF 2008**

- Memories of the past may not be wholly positive for many children, however it may be even more important for such children to ‘bear witness to each other’s experiences’.
- Quality is more important than quantity. Frequency of contact to some extent will be determined by practical matters such as distance and availability plus the attitudes of carers. But frequency in itself is not enough to guarantee that siblings will benefit from contact and Argent usefully summarises the components of what Brodzinsky calls ‘communicative openness’ which underpins contact that children will really benefit from.
- Argent suggests that prospective adopters may be put off by contact stipulations which are too prescriptive whilst involving carers in negotiating arrangements to meet the children’s needs can be a valuable part of preparation. Whatever is envisaged early on should be open to further discussion with children, adopters and birth relatives before arrangements are finalised. Also, *“If the purpose of staying connected can be agreed, the arrangements should follow more easily.”* She suggests that if they don’t, it may be helpful to use a mediation service to enable everyone to speak and be heard.
- Argent emphasises ‘the one golden rule of contact’: the importance of flexibility and the need for contact arrangements to change as circumstances alter and especially as children get older. However, she stresses that flexibility should never be confused with vagueness. She references Rushton’s 2001 study which found that although new adoptive parents were committed to maintaining sibling contact, half of them lacked specific contact plans for their children and practical problems in contact were not being addressed by workers. (This mirrors much of my experience as the contact specialist for Support After Adoption.)
- Contact with siblings ‘at home’: this is one of the most challenging and complex issues for families and professionals but I found this section one of the least helpful, probably because the Top Tips format only allows for key principles to be stated. These are that *“even absent siblings can be kept in mind....Unless there are quite exceptional circumstances, there should be no excuse for losing siblings altogether....Contact with ‘at home’ siblings can be both reassuring and troubling”* so all the children involved need preparation and ‘debriefing.’
- Don’t overlook the significance of foster sibling relationships to many children. (By ‘foster sibling’ Argent seems only to include ‘children who foster’ but I’d suggest we also need to think about the adopted child’s relationship with other foster children they have lived with as well as I’m aware of several cases where it has been clear that the adopted child would have benefited from a contact plan which maintained a link for them with a child with whom they had shared their bridging foster placement.)

- Sibling contact isn't 'fits one, fits all'. In any sibling group, whether placed together or separated, not all the children will want the same contact, whether because of different relationships or different ages and stages of development.
- Unrelated adopted siblings will obviously have individual contact arrangements and these may differ considerably. This may raise issues for children and parents which Argent suggests are best helped by openness and perhaps including children in their sibling's contact.

Argent lists nine 'Points to consider' regarding sibling contact:

1. **Clear lines of communication are needed between the responsible adults.** She highlights a couple of practical issues that need agreement (eg How will the contact be arranged? Will all the siblings always meet each time or will they also get together in pairs/smaller numbers?). Other sources (eg Smith and Logan) cover this in more detail.
2. **Activities suit most children better than more formal visits.** Contact involves costs and these should be factored into the adoption support plan. The essence of the example Argent gives here is that where we are setting up contact between two or more adoptive families we may need to help them talk with each other about their relative financial position and the type/cost of contact activities/venues they are able to manage, which will reduce the risk of contact later faltering or ending because of an imbalance that families are often inhibited from talking about themselves.
3. **Acknowledging ethnic, cultural and socio-economic family lifestyles will ease contact arrangements.** This is certainly my experience from working with post-order families - these differences can easily be misinterpreted as a lack of interest and commitment to contact if not previously highlighted by workers as issues that need to be taken into account throughout.
4. **Siblings who have been separated for good reasons are likely to have troubled relationships. If they can't live together, they will probably not be able to have positive contact without ongoing therapeutic support.** (I'd suggest that ongoing professional therapeutic support is not necessarily a prerequisite and that therapeutically-aware parenting backed by access to professional therapeutic advice may be sufficient for most children.)
5. **Close supervision of contact is needed if the siblings have previously experienced sexual abuse, especially if this has involved inter-sibling abuse.** The purpose of supervision and the role of the supervisor (whether professional or carer) needs to be carefully defined and explained to all.
6. **Siblings and carers need guidelines about information which can be freely exchanged and what needs to be kept private and why – "*Children cannot and should not be relied on to keep secrets but successful efforts can be made to involve them in the bigger picture.*"** This is especially relevant where decisions about contact need to be made between siblings in an adoptive family and siblings remaining with the birth family or in foster care with birth family contact.
7. **Birth children in adoptive families shouldn't be left out of sibling contact** though they may need extra attention if they feel excluded.

8. **Grandparents may be very good at making contact go well because they are not quite as closely involved.** (Certainly most of our adopters regard contact with birth grandparents as less threatening and daunting than contact with birth parents. However, my experience is that there are still plenty of issues that can cause tension, eg presents, the names people use to refer to themselves).
9. **Regular reviews can explore what is working well and what might need to be changed.** Argent writes that in an ideal world, a named worker would be available to all concerned - here in Notts, post-order adoptive and birth families can seek advice and support on contact as needed by contacting Support After Adoption.

**Further essential reading when considering setting up face-to-face contact:**

- **Carole Smith and Janette Logan, After Adoption: direct contact and relationships, Routledge 2004**
- **Catherine Macaskill, Safe Contact? Children in permanent placements and contact with their birth families, Russell House Publishing 2002**

Both of these books contain useful lists and comments on the many practical elements of direct contact which are easy to overlook but which, if discussed and agreed between all the parties before contact begins, can maximise the chances of successful and meaningful contact which will be sustained.

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