

## Episode 31 | Listening to the child on staying in touch transcript

Welcome to CoramBAAF Conversations, a podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering and kinship care. We ask children, social care professionals, and experts by experience to join us to share with us and you, our listeners, their experiences, reflections and knowledge. I hope you enjoy.

Hello, I'm Lindy Wotton. I'm an Associate Trainer with CoramBAAF, and today I've just been asked to talk a bit about some of the considerations to take into account when communicating with children and young people about their contact and staying in touch plans. Obviously, listening effectively to children and young people, we're helping ensure that these arrangements can reflect the changing needs of the child throughout their childhood, their teenage years and beyond. Terminology and social work is always evolving, and the term contact is increasingly being replaced by terms such as staying in touch or keeping in touch arrangements. I contact, though does remain a term in legislation and regulations, so throughout this short talk, I'll just tend to use both or use them into interchangeably. We know that children and young people gain significant benefits from a permanent plan of adoption, but they also suffer significant losses and that as practitioners, we always need to engage with and listen to children and young people's feelings about both of these aspects of adoption. There often exists today a very strong narrative about everything that a child or young person can gain from adoption and research does show us that indeed, children do gain a lot from adoption. But if we only focus on what children gain, it does mean that we will ignore what they lose, and it's very important. You don't do this as adoptive children have a great sense of loss. They lose birth, family history, lived experience, memories, relationships and identity. But we also know children should not have to lose all of these in order to gain a new family. They don't need their loss to be any greater than it has to be. So we need to think carefully about connections and relationships with family members or significant others that are important to them or could be important to them in the future so that these can be supported and maintained by well considered staying in touch plans and to make sure that they don't lose these connections to. So today I'm just going to briefly remind us of what children and young people need post adoption. Some of the evidence, like good staying in touch arrangements can help meet these needs. And then some suggestions for how to listen to children and young people effectively, to be able to take their views into account when making these plans. So what do children need? Post adoption. I mean, everyone listening to this will. Know this. But you know. Just to run through it, they need security, love and to belong to their new family. And there is significant evidence now that having communicative openness within the adoptive family and with it around. Them can help with. This it can bring acceptance of the birth family

as linked with acceptance of the child and can actually bring them closer and aid emotional connection. Children need knowledge of their birth family, their personal history and why they needed to be adopted again. Contact plans staying in touch with other family members can help children. Young people get their questions answered and help them to understand their story, to revisit it from different angles. And possibly get different perspectives that actually make it feel more real and believable for them. Children and young people also have to manage feelings of loss and separation, and we're increasingly aware as practitioners from new models of adoption transitions, that separation is really traumatic in itself. And they're sort of cutting off contact and not people being not able to main connections and maintain connections and communication. It's not necessarily the best way to help children manage and process change your loss. We need to think about appropriate levels of communication that can help children manage and work through these painful and complex feelings. They can't just be avoided by not seeing people. To make sense of being in more than one family is another need for adoptive children. Adoptive children has two family. These are some live origin, their birth family and their adoptive family. We need to encourage a more open adoption culture where adoptive families are seen as blended families where the child needs to live and be part of another family but does not have to leave all relationship or connection with their birth family. Kind. And we're increasingly thinking about, you know, creative and individual ways that this these needs can be met for children. And they need to recover from early harm for feeling safe and secure in the adoptive family is very important. And knowing that their new adoptive family will protect them from harm is key. So staying in touch or contact arrangements will be different and will not be the same for every child or young person, but the the these plans do have the potential to help with all of these needs and they should be focused on helping the child to achieve those objectives. So the other part we're thinking about is listening to children and young people, you know, and and I just wanted to run through a bit of the research that basically outlined to us or proved to us that actually is really important and we need to listen to children and young people about their staying in touch plans. So I've drawn very heavily on work from Beth Neal and her colleagues at the University of East Anglia. They did a study in 2015. Messages from adopted young people and that children in that study told them that contact staying in touch should always be an opt. Learn that life story materials were really important to them. And we know these need to be reviewed and to grow. They're not a sort of one off book. They're they're like a living on going thing that we want children to be involved with. So thinking about ways to help them be part and continue to write their life story, which is obviously of evolving day-to-day. We know that identity development, assisted by was assisted by ongoing contact and the openness of the doctor's. This study again showed us that. And it showed us that young people wanted them to us to keep communicating about staying in touch and contact, that there is changed and can change quite considerably throughout the different stages of childhood and adolescence. And very importantly, that support was needed well beyond the

age of 18. We so we really need help throughout the life course, but we're focusing very much on children and young people, but we know that suddenly at 18 or 21 or 25, we don't just suddenly change and not need support and certainly the openness of adoptive families is very, very key to helping make these plans work. They also researched young people, satisfaction with openness and nearly all saw benefits in having contact and argue that the option should be there. 1 quote being, even if the contacts only brief. I think social workers should ensure the option of staying in contact is always left open. And a more. Recent study 2020 Ryan Etal. Through the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, they came up with six key messages about thinking about contacts and what young people needed. I would go to that report and read it in in depth. I think it's really useful, but very importantly one of those six key. Messages was the need to listen to the views of children and young people about their staying in touch and contact plans. So we know it's important for children and we know they want it. They all they want us to keep thinking about it. We also know it's a complex task. So I did want to acknowledge that even when contact is challenging and painful, it can still though be wanted and valued. By the child or young person, and that it's really important as practitioners that we distinguish this type of contact from contact that is actually harmful to a child. So again, I think you know there can be a these can get mixed up if we don't really listen to children and really think about distinguishing them. We know that the needs and views of children will change overtime. It would be very rare for them not to change, so we need to constantly revisit and review and talk with children and young people about these plans and think about whether they're meeting their current needs. Where children are too young to express wishes and feelings, maybe pre verbal or very, very young or not able to use words in that way. We especially need to consider their potential. Long term contact needs. So I guess that does require a practitioner to really think about the child at all stages of their life and make sure that a plan at the at the stage they are working and having to write it allows for reviews and flexibilities for things to change. Very much feel that sometimes with very young children, especially if they haven't had a relationship with a family member we because they're so young, really to some degree, and they wouldn't have known that it's. Sort of. They don't know them and it doesn't matter, but there's also a massive potential there for a future. Meaningful relationship that could be incredibly important for that child's place in the world and their identity, and they're feeling held. So we do really need to think about about these things at all stages. We know some children may express feelings about family contacts through their behaviour. They might feel happy and relaxed, or appear happy and relaxed. Or they might feel fearful and disturbed. Or they may present with behaviours that are more complex or seem contradictory to what they're saying. And as practitioners, we're going to have to try to unpick and make some sense and make our best decisions from this type of communication. Or relationships are dynamic. One of the things that the studies from the University of East Anglia have really shown us is that is that the adults are a really important part of this mix mix and

their relationships and that relationships change and they grow and they feed into one another. So we really need to bear that in mind. And we're trying to think about long term plans and plans that can be flexible to work with these relationship dynamics. Family and friendship networks are probably complex for all of us, but are particularly complicated and difficult for children separated from their families, and so thinking about contact and staying in touch with relatives from a wider network can be greatly valued by children. Maybe seal more possible in plans to enable that in the first instance. Those relationships may seem less complicated or more distance, and that may be their great value to the child. And just interesting stats from the adoption barometer from Adoption UK was a quote in 2021 that young people aged 16 to 25 who said that their first priority was parents who were able to talk about all aspects of being adopted. And that was very much in the context of. Their birth families, that they have other parts of their identity and really needing a doctors to be able to help them talk and think. About these things. So that was a bit of a whistle stop tour, probably reviewing a lot of what's already known and and again, that possibly is what I'm going to do now, but I'm just going to talk briefly about thinking about listening to children and young people and and today. And I've drawn very heavily on some of the research and practise. Materials produced by the University of East Angler and at the end of this talk, I will be recommending that you know anyone further interested in developing their practise or certainly visit their those that website and look at those resources. So firstly, let's think about communicating with very young children. So some children may have no conscious memories of birth, family or significant others, and therefore sometimes staying in touch or contact plans are questioned a bit because of that, and a chance for these relationships to develop or not met people. But one of the thing. Things with a child, a very young child. It can mean that therefore staying in touch planned or contact can actually be less emotionally demanding for the child. It's not raising memories. They're not. They're not perturbed by it in. The same way. And it can help to establish relationships between. Everyone involved so you can grow these relationship and this in turn down the line reduces the risks of unplanned contact later in childhood. So very much they're thinking about it just beginning to grow and develop relationships between the child. And family or significant others, but as well as the adults involved. Which we know say is quite an important dimension to staying in touch plans working. So we know preverbal children obviously can't express themselves in words, but we also know very young children can find it difficult to express feelings and wishes about contact with family in words. Children may often have torn loyalties, changing or mixed feelings, or they can sometimes find themselves echoing the anxieties of carers or social workers without really being able to express or knowing what their own view is. So our task. Is really quite difficult. We're trying to understand this inner world of a child. What's going on for them, but without them necessarily having the words to express it. So just some tips really that again I think is in are in everyone's toolbox anyway, but to use creative play and drawing. Have a toolkit at hand to engage with the child. I hope everyone has a bag of some play things or

some cars or some teddy faces or whatever. It is just to make sure that we don't just ask questions. You know as we're trying to do it in a gentle way, but that we actually engage with the child through play and think about what they are communicating through that. I know when I was in direct practise I used to get lots of good ideas from a book called Direct work with vulnerable children. And playful activities and strategies for communication. I think that was by Audrey Tate and Helen Wasu, but there are also some really good core and bath publications listening to children's wishes and feelings by Mary Corrigan and Joan Moore and communicating through play by Bernie Stringer, just to mention a couple. Is possible observe the child's responses before, during and after contact? Hopefully there have been notes from contact sessions you know, prior to a children being placed, have a sense of actually how a child engages with these these family members. If these are people that I've met before and compare these with how a child is day-to-day with their adoptive family to get some sense of any difference or what comes out. Differently. And if it hasn't been possible, you know, we're saying in regard to some people where it may seem right for them to start to build a relationship. And then in the here and now, when they do meet to observe how a child is, when they are talked about or how they respond to photos or objects associated with the person, it's ways to try to get away from just language in a in thinking about what's going on for young children. Notice the child's facial expressions, their body language, where they position themselves in the room or the space. Their response is to any physical affection, shown or not shown food offered, or laughter or tears from adults. What what emotions does the child Express openly? What does it look like? They might be trying to mask? How are they behaving?

Be on the.

Lookout for anxiety and obviously I think we know children show this in many, many ways. Eating problems, sleep disturbances, bed wetting, clingy or rejecting, anxious to please. Frozen expressions hide. Being aggression babies could avert a gaze or whole bodies rigidly. But we just must be careful when interpreting these as well, though, to remember that a level of anxiety is expected in contact and does not necessarily mean that all contacts all staying in touch plans need to stop. Young children want to be asked what they think about contact, but they also need permission from adults to choose not to express a view, and this must be put to the child neutrally so they don't feel there's a right way to behave or a right choice to make. They have a right to express a view and a right to. Not express a view. And they're both equally valued. And just to reiterate again that it's totally normal for young children to feel excited or anxious or worried about birth, relatives and confused and sad around contact. They need the care and support of the doctors and professionals to help them manage these emotions, not necessarily that the contact must stop. So we need to help think about what previous experiences of these family members may be. What insight can that give us? What might that mean for the plans and what sort of support they need? What pressures may they they may be

experiencing in that moment, and what can be done to help the staying in touch plans be less anxiety provoking and more enjoyable for them? You know, contact centres, for example, can bring back stressful memories or somatic memories in the body, and may not be the best places to meet in. Can we be creative? About this, this is something we can think about when we're creating these plans. And in order to support young children to have their voice about their contact plans, we need them to be able to be free to communicate with the doctors about these and not feel judged. So we need a doctors always to be able to talk about contact and staying in touch with a child. And this is an important opportunity to build closest closeness and regulate and manage any of their own anxieties or complex feelings away from the child. So social workers can help by spending time talking and thinking with the doctors about a child's experiences and reviewing the plans for staying touch together. And social workers can also help support their doctors to be honest and open and talking about their own feelings and their anxieties, and to help them regulate and manage their own feelings around this appropriately. And a doctors can help young children by accepting their connection with the birth family or significant others, whilst also affirming their permanent membership of the adoptive family. So thinking about communication with older children as adopted children grow up very often, their views about staying in touch changes and that adults must be open to and aware of these changing needs. So some might need to take a break from actual contact that's happening and focus on other things such as exams, peer relationship, school issues, etcetera. Some and many in the teenage years will have new questions. They'll want more detailed or in-depth information and may well want a very different form or type of staying in touch. And this really needs to be thought about and discussed with them. And just what we know is that 16 is too early for some to be feeling that they want to do that, but we know for others it can be much too late and that they will potentially have to try to make contact prior to that age so there isn't any set age or just pick that one really, but there isn't any set age, but we do really need to know that things change and that and that actually we need to be alongside young people in this journey. What we do know about older children, teenagers is what they want, though they want adults to listen to them and take their views about contact seriously. But they still need adult support and guidance. They generally want the door to future contact to be left open, even if they do not want that contact right now. Most older adopted children say that they value contact even when it is quite difficult. And we know that unmet contact needs can drive undisclosed contacts through social media. And that teenagers are just so much safer online when adoptive parents can accept their curiosity and search alongside them. So I guess what we really need to do is think, what are the barriers at the moment in place in our practise to listening to children and gathering their views. And I'm sure there are lots we can think of, but then in running through those to think well, you know, how can I overcome this barrier? How could I possibly do this better? What could I do a bit differently? But we must, as practitioners remember that whilst children and young people's

views need to be gathered and listened to and taken into account, days themselves should not bear the burden of the final decisions about the plan for staying in touch. But we should always be able to help them understand the decisions about staying in touch and have them explain clearly and in an age appropriate way. All children and young people are unique and will have different contacts. Staying in touch needs and these needs will change over time, so plans must be regularly reviewed with the involvement of the child or young person. Their wishes and feelings need to be listened to and taken into account, and we need to think about how we do that. I just want to just again to mention some credits really that that I've drawn heavily on the work of Beth Neal and colleagues at the University of East Anglia and I really do recommend visiting the research and practise websites where there are more detailed materials and worksheets and things that can help with this area of practise. And also to point out that core and bass themselves also run a day long, making plans for staying in touch course, which covers further key messages from research about staying in touch and also as an opportunity for attendees to consider different resources and models to help their practise in the area. Thanks for making the time to listen today.

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