

Approaching 18 – contact & file access – What are your options.

Contact and letterbox post 18

If you are fast approaching 18 and currently have some contact arrangement with your birth family, it is worth considering what your options are for continuing this long before you turn 18.

Currently there is no legal requirement for your Regional adoption agency contact/letterbox team to continue supporting this and most will cease this service when you turn 18. Therefore it is good to have a plan in place before this happens.

Here are some things to consider

Just because you are turning 18 doesn't mean this is the only time you can meet your birth relatives, there is no pressure to rush into this because you are turning the legal age. It has to be the right time for everyone for things to work out in the long run. We recommend accessing your adoption files before making contact, this is the starting point of most of our intermediary work. Having a good understanding of your history and file information gives you a great basis for moving forward.

If you have existing letterbox and you would like to continue this, can each person in the arrangement set up an email address that is for this purpose and this purpose only, this way you can continue to exchange emails. It would be helpful to think about how often you want that to be, if you want to follow the previous agreement or if you want to be more fluid.

If you are wanting to increase the level of contact then again think about increasing it slowly.

For most people turning 18 their thoughts might be focused on passing their driving test, finding a job, going on holiday on their own, going to university or college, or having their first legal alcoholic drink.

As an adopted person you have all that still, but the more burning questions for many are the huge life altering decisions such as being able to access your adoption file, or whether or not you want to continue with letterbox contact or whether or not you want to think about face to face contact with birth family.

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It feels like a lot to be pinned on the shoulders of an 18 year old and I hear lots of comments such as 'when I'm 18 I can see my birth parents' or 'when I'm 18 I can access my file'. To me it feels like 18 has become a golden number, but one that I am cautious of and that my 18 year old self was also cautious of.

I didn't come to think about my files or searching for my birth family until I was 23. I am not too sure of the reasons why, but maybe intuitively I knew that at 18 I was not in the right place to do it. I was too busy getting through the day to focus on such a large and important part of my life. I started at 23 because I had found some independence in life, had settled into a job, had some stability and felt in a good place to start asking questions.

I had Facebook, but I didn't even think to use it to search. I knew my birth mothers name, but I knew I needed proper support. I had questions about my files I wanted someone with experience of adoption to help me answer. I struggled talking to my family about it, because although they said they were supportive, I felt incredibly guilty (as so many adoptees do) and I knew they had never had any support about how this might feel for them.

I also couldn't really speak to my friends about it because it was all fantasy for them and again I wanted someone 'in the know', someone who would really listen and understand my feelings. I am so pleased I did this as I was so used to putting everybody else's feelings before my own and my social worker gave me the space to be heard and explained that my feelings were just as important as everybody else's, if not more important as I was powerless in the decisions made about me as a baby.

When things didn't work out they helped me put boundaries up and they also helped my birth parents get their own support. Without that I might have taken on the emotional weight of both my adoptive family and birth family which would have been very hard.

So I contacted the local authority and was supported by a very experienced social worker. Their support throughout the entire process (which took years) was invaluable. They gave me the freedom to explore things and express how I felt about it all which felt very safe. I could talk things through before writing a letter and when it came to meeting them they supported me with that.

Despite all the support, my birth family and I don't see each other because it is complex, emotional and each family member has a different view on my adoption. I have, with the support from my social worker and a group of very good friends been able to process that and can talk about it now without becoming upset by it. I know if I had done this via Facebook or any other social media I would probably be in a very different place with it all.

So when I talk to young people about accessing their files or making contact these are the questions I like to get them to think about first and feel they are really valuable in helping make decisions.

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File access

- What is driving your motivation?
 - Have you been triggered by someone else?
 - Have you been triggered by something you have seen on TV or a conversation you have had?
 - Is accessing your file something you have been thinking about for a long period of time (months - years)
- What support do you have around you?
 - Do you have supportive parents, friends or social worker who you can turn to and talk openly to about this? Support is essential!
- What else is going on in your life?
 - Are you in a stable place? If you are doing exams, moving house, finished a relationship or started a new job, then now is probably not the best time.
- Have you explored the information you already have? For example your life story book or any paperwork you have?
 - Have you talked to your adoptive parents recently about this, maybe you could broach the subject by text if your feel face to face might be hard?
- Are you wanting a specific piece of information from your files?
 - If so can you request that specific information at the moment and come back to your file and further information later?

Contact with birth family

- Have you accessed your adoption file? We always recommend this as a starting point where possible.
- What is your motivation?
 - Have you been triggered by a loss? A recent change in friendship/ relationship? If so you may want to wait a few months – 1 year to see if you still feel the same towards contact.

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- Have you thought about what type of relationship you want with the person you want to contact? And how often do you might want contact?
 - How would you feel if a first family member started contacting you every day or alternatively they didn't respond?
- Who in the family would you like to build relationship with and are there people you don't want a relationship with?
- What support do you have around you? Who can you talk to freely about the situation? Good support is vital!
- How would you manage unwanted contact from a first family member who you didn't seek contact with but the person you are in contact with has shared your details with them?
- Have you thought about what position your first family might be in, do you feel prepared for the fact they may not be in the best place, their life may be similar to when you were adopted. Or you may find that their life has changed significantly.
 - Have you considered how either of these might make you feel?

PAC-UK Access to Adoption Records, Searching and Intermediary Service

Many adopted adults want to find out more about the reasons for their adoption which can lead to them searching for and sometimes contacting their birth family.

Via our [PAC-UK Access to Adoption Records, Searching and Intermediary Service](#) we can access adoption records and work through them with you and discuss whether you want to look for your birth family.

Our experienced researchers can usually trace birth family members and we can make intermediary contact with them on your behalf giving a better chance of a good outcome and giving you support through this emotional process.

This service offers preparation for possible contact and/or reunion with birth relatives, as well as initiation of contact with birth relatives, in accordance with relevant legislation. Visit www.pac-uk.org for more information.