



Letterbox Guidance For Adoptive Parents



Introduction

In the past when children were adopted, this was thought to be a final arrangement and all contact was stopped. However, adopted adults have told us that this has left them feeling like a 'jigsaw with a piece missing'.

Now most children placed for adoption have indirect contact known as Letterbox arrangements. Such an arrangement allows for the exchange of information between birth relatives and adoptive parents.

Why have a Letterbox?

Adopted people who do not know much about their original backgrounds can sometimes feel they don't really know who they are. This feeling can surface at different times throughout their lives. Adopted people can also feel upset by learning later in life that they have brothers or sisters born to their own birth mother. Or they can be concerned by not knowing what happened to their birth family over the years.

These factors - and the knowledge that birth family frequently feel unresolved anguish and concern about children who have been adopted from them - have led to a belief that greater openness between birth families and adoptive families can help everyone.

In more and more cases children adopted today will have memories of their birth families and a sense of some connection to them, whatever the reasons for becoming adopted.

Letterbox Guidance

The setting up of a news exchange, such as that provided by the Letterbox, is a way of helping children, whose lives have been disrupted, to maintain a coherent sense of themselves and develop an integrated sense of identity. This is important to their long-term emotional health.

At first, people who are adopting a child often feel some anxiety about their own security when considering Letterbox. As you will remember from training the potential benefits for your child/ren are invaluable. To adoptive parents, anything that benefits their child's longterm sense of identity and emotional health is welcomed.

In many cases an adopted child may have brothers and sisters living elsewhere. If direct meetings aren't appropriate, the Letterbox is an important way of staying in touch.

The information you send will depend on who you are sending to and their past relationship with your child and, perhaps, with you. It may be different for each of several birth relatives.



Remember...

Contact is not an event, but a relational experience. Like any relationship, it will have its ups and downs and will be subject to change over time. How each person behaves, thinks and feels in contact can change how the other parties behave, think and feel. Well-facilitated contact is associated with positive well-being outcomes for children and young people in both the short and long term.

What do I write in a letter?

Most adoptive families find there is a great deal to say about their child. However, the areas to cover in a letter are whatever you think is likely to help a birth parent or relative keep in touch with your child's progress and to help them to be reassured that the child is well cared for.

Comments from birth parents show that they particularly appreciate knowing something of the following:

- Your child's general health and any notable ill health.
- Your child's physical appearance, how tall your child is, their looks and personality, favourite foods or treats.
- Their progress at school, hobbies and interests, including any certificate, awards etc.
- Any anecdote on your child's habits or reactions.
- Any changes in your family, e.g. new brothers or sisters, house moves (please note that changes of addresses should be notified separately to the Letterbox to keep it confidential)
- Your feelings about being a parent to your child. A balance needs to be struck between reassuring the birth parent that a child is loved, but not being over enthusiastic about how wonderful life is.
- How they get on with friends and family. It may be helpful for you to think about what kind of letter you would like to receive if you were in the position of the birth relative.
- Your letter content will be dependent upon the circumstances surrounding the adoption and will be greatly facilitated if you have had the opportunity to meet the person or persons you are writing to. If the birth relative has learning difficulties then this needs to be taken into consideration when writing the letter.

Knowing how to address a letter can be difficult if not planned in advance. If you have met the child's birth relatives it is much easier to address a letter directly, such as 'Dear Joan', and to sign your first name at the end. Birth relatives always prefer a personalised letter.

If you are writing to more than one birth relative, you may choose to do one letter, which can be copied and you can then write the names in.

If you have some really difficult information about your child that you feel the birth family need to be aware of, it would be advisable to discuss this with us.



Examples of letters sent by Adoptive Parent(s)

Hello Barbara & John.

Susan has had a very busy time since we last wrote to you. She has settled down really well at school and has lots of friends. Susan enjoys school and is very happy there. Susan has started to show her true colours at school and her teacher describes her as very stubborn!

She chatters a lot and likes to be in the middle of everything so she does get into trouble sometimes!

When Susan arrives at school or at a party everyone runs up to her and wants to play with her. It is lovely to see she is so popular, Susan is very kind too, she has a very caring nature and is always looking for ways to help others.

Susan is still a very good, if very slow, eater. She still eats lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, but she has now discovered Pizza Hut (though the best bit for her is the salad bar!!).

Susan had a lovely birthday, she had a disco party and invited all her friends from her class at school. She loved getting dressed up in her glittery party clothes and wearing make up.

Susan enjoyed Christmas too. She met Santa on a Santa Cruise and got a present, she was very brave and talked to him telling him what she wanted and that she had been a very good girl!

Susan is still doing her trampolining and dancing. She has stopped Gymnastics for the time being as she has swimming lessons now and they are on at the same time. Susan loves the water and has no fear – she is doing really well.

Susan is now ready to do her first dance exams, she loves practising her routines around the house and skipping along, pointing her toes wherever we go.

Susan is a confident, noisy, cheeky, naughty, loveable little girl. What more can I say?

We won't let her forget you.

Take Care

Jane & Andrew

Dear Sharon & Paul

Charlotte is doing very well. She has grown quite a lot and is now about 118 cm tall, this makes her one of the tallest children in her class. Charlotte is working hard at school. She is reading well and recognises all her letters. Charlotte can read quite a few words by herself and is enjoying writing. Charlotte has made lots of new friends.

Charlotte loves dancing and singing. She is quite active and getting quite fit. Charlotte is getting on well with her new brother and loves all the animals.

Charlotte had a lovely Christmas and got lots of presents from the family and is still busy playing with them all.

We have enclosed a photograph for you.

Best Wishes

Janet and Phil



Photographs

As you would expect, photographs are especially valued and appreciated by birth relatives. Adoptive families often send these regularly without any concern.

However, some adoptive families are concerned about sending photographs and need time to think through any possible implications. It seems that their major worry springs from protective feelings. They worry that their child might be 'identified', leading to an unsolicited approach by a birth relative, or they have a general sense of insecurity about contact with the birth family. The reassuring thing is that the reverse generally appears to be true. Birth relatives receiving photographs feel very appreciative of this. They also worry that photos sent for birth family will be used on social media sites.

We explain to birth family that if it is found that any photographs are being openly shared on the internet that they jeopardise receiving future photographs. Although not legally binding, they are also asked to sign an agreement to say that they will not openly share any photographs in this way.

Adoptive families are often disappointed if there are no photographs of birth relatives available for their child at the time he or she joins them. However, birth parents can be more willing to send an updated photograph of themselves or other significant family members once they realise that this has been agreed.

If you wish to protect your identity you may consider the following points when choosing photographs to send to birth relatives:

- School photographs - these can often include potentially identifying information such as school badge, uniform etc. If you feel that such details may be a threat to the confidentiality of yourselves or child(ren) you may wish to consider sending other less identifiable photographs.
- Car registration numbers, street signs, place names.

Please remember that the above can also be identified by various means and screen your photographs for details you would not wish to pass onto birth family members.

- Studio photographs and those developed at high street outlets.

Studio photographs are sometimes numbered on the back, or even identified by the name of the photographic facility.

- **Jpeg photos sometimes can contain personal information in their 'properties', please check any identifying information has been removed.**

Please check your photographs before sending them if you are concerned about this.

- No group photographs i.e. school events or photographs that would identify other children.
- It is our policy that only the child or sibling group who is adopted should be on the photograph.

If you need additional help with writing this letter, please contact the Letterbox on 01642 526400.



Q&A

Will I be reminded when a letter is due?

If you have forgotten to send your update we will send a reminder to you if a member of the birth family has been in touch to collect their information at the agreed time and we have not received it.

What about confidentiality?

All information received by Letterbox is treated as carefully and confidentially as adoption records. Basic details will be kept on record to allow the system to operate and these will be kept confidentially.

It is very important that YOU check carefully that letters and photos do not accidentally include confidential or identifying information (such as names, addresses, names of schools, school photos etc), even though all information sent via Letterbox is checked.

Word documents or similar, can sometimes contain personal information in their 'properties', **please check any identifying information has been removed**

Where and how should I send my letters?

We ask you to send all items unsealed (as the contents are checked) with the identifying information on a separate sheet:

- Your child's original name - this prevents their adoptive name being inadvertently disclosed.
- Your child's date of birth

to: **Letterbox**
Adoption Tees Valley
Oxbridge Avenue
Stockton-on-Tees
TS18 4LE

or: **letterbox@adoptionteesvalley.org.uk**

What if something urgent happens?

If you think there is a need for news to be sent urgently (such as illness or death etc), please contact us and we will discuss this with you.

In some cases information in the letter may be distressing, prior to sending this information a member of the Team will contact you.

When are letters from other people sent to me?

When we receive information for you, we will send it on if that is part of the arrangement. If for any reason, it has not been agreed to send information on, it will be kept on file and you will be notified of this.

What if I do not receive any news?

If Letterbox does not hear from one of the people in the agreement, even after they have been sent a reminder.

We know it may be disappointing or difficult when you do not receive a letter as agreed, but it could be for one of many reasons and does not necessarily mean a lack of concern. We would urge you to continue to send your news every year and it may be that in the future the other person will start sending their news again too. If you feel it would be helpful to talk over your feelings about not receiving any news please contact us.

What if I'm unhappy with how the arrangements are working?

If you have any concerns about your arrangements, please contact us to explain what is troubling you. We will do everything we can to help you.

There may be times when it is not easy to send information, but please remember your child will benefit greatly from these communications between yourselves and their birth family.

It is also important to the birth relatives to know how the child is.

We do not expect you to discontinue the agreed arrangements; however if this does occur somebody from Adoption Tees Valley will contact you to discuss this further. We will also contact the birth relative who has a right to seek legal advice.

Q&A

What longer-term matters do I need to think about?

When a child is very young, one of the most important longer-term issues is to plan when and how you will explain to your child that you regularly send news to birth relatives. This situation can be similar to explaining about adoption itself. You will have had advice on ways of doing this, including the use of storybooks, which explain an adopted child's experiences before and after joining you.

It is a natural next step to also explain that you write regularly to let birth relatives know how your child has been getting on, or that the birthday or Christmas cards received are from birth relatives.

Some children send a drawing to go with the letter, or often older children like to be involved in the writing of the letter.

Receiving updated information from birth relatives fits into this same pattern of sharing information with your child. Sometimes it may include news that your child will find difficult, such as their birth mother having another child, and being able to care for that child herself.

The urge to protect an adopted child from painful news, such as the death of a close relative, also needs consideration. Timing can be a matter of your choice, but as with other difficult news, the longer you keep it back, the more it turns into a secret difficult to disclose. When children eventually find out, they are not usually pleased that such news was kept from them. As you develop openness in explaining all the facts of adoption to your child, the sharing of news of any kind becomes much more natural and less of a hurdle to overcome.

It is important to be open about Letterbox with your child as when they reach the age of 17 they will be sent a letter regarding the Letterbox arrangements when they reach 18, asking if they wish to continue receiving letters and if so, how.

If, after reading this leaflet, there is anything you still feel unsure about, please discuss them with your Adoption Social Worker or contact us.

Contact Details

Letterbox
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TS18 4LE

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