

What is contact? ... A guide for children

Hedi Argent

British Association for Adoption and Fostering

London, 2004

This is a 26 page booklet which has been written for children who are living in foster care or who have been adopted. It incorporates simple explanations, photos and questions with space for children to write their own answers.

Each kind of contact is explained with case vignettes. For example, in the section on photographs, the introduction reads:

Photographs are a way of describing lives in pictures. If you send a photo of yourself taken on your birthday blowing out the candles on your cake, anyone can tell how old you are by counting the candles. If you get a photo of someone you care about looking good, then you know that they're OK.

This is followed by the story of Donna and the photos in her life book and then ends with some questions such as:

Have you got your own book with photos? and

If you were going to send a photo of yourself to someone special, what would you be doing and what would you wear?

The booklet, with its mixture of information and story, thus offers a gentle way of introducing and discussing not only contact with birth relatives, but also why children are not living with their natural families. While it is likely to be best

appreciated by children under the age of 12, older children might also find it interesting in terms of its clear distinction between different kinds of contact possibilities.

So how well does this booklet translate to the Australian context? There are very minor references to the UK situation such as a brief description of Children's Hearings in Scotland. More importantly, if such a booklet were to be written in Australia or New Zealand, the section 'Visits and Meetings' would be near the beginning rather than near the end, reflecting the importance of face to face contact in our adoption and foster care culture. Similarly, 'letterbox contact' would move from the beginning to the end of the booklet.

However, given that this booklet provides a very useful tool for further discussion, and that it is likely to be read by children in conjunction with parents/carers/social workers, it is well recommended.

Reviewed by:

Dr Cas O'Neill

Loving and living with traumatised children ... Reflections by adoptive parents

Megan Hirst

British Association for Adoption and Fostering

London, 2005

Loving and living with traumatised children ... Reflections by adoptive parents is an interesting combination of a research report and the very honest reflections of nine adoptive parents of children with attachment difficulties. It is a small (105 pages) but very powerful book, which is clearly written and very interesting.

The parents who took part in this research came together because their children had all been referred to a music therapist. The therapist subsequently suggested that the parents might like to meet to look at how they had been affected by the trauma brought into their families with the children. The result was a group of nine parents who met for a total of four days to share music-making as well as reflections on their experiences and feelings as adoptive parents to children with attachment difficulties. The group subsequently decided to write about the process and adopted a collective author pseudonym (Megan Hirst).

This book contains no surprises for adoptive, foster and permanent care parents who are caring for children traumatised by abuse and neglect in their birth families. What is refreshing is that the parents who took part in this process felt empowered by the research methodology of cooperative enquiry to speak and write very honestly about how their children had changed their lives – often for the worse. They write about:

- parenting in 'management mode' all the time – intellectually rather than instinctively; having to plan for all eventualities; being hyper-vigilant;
- being unable to share the full impact of the child's behaviour with other parents, in order not to isolate the child from potential friends (but in the process becoming more isolated themselves);
- how exhausting it was to be a parent to a troubled child;
- how they were sometimes blamed for their child's behaviour by social workers, teachers, relatives and friends and how they often blamed themselves;
- how other children in their families had decided that they would never become adoptive parents themselves 'under any circumstances' (p. 58);
- the lack of support and their difficulties in convincing welfare agencies that they really did need it – 'it struck us as bizarre that a system that took so much time, trouble and resources to approve adopters would

invariably blame those chosen few when the behaviour of an adopted child did not respond to "normal" parenting' (p. 61).

The other aspect of this book is the description of how the research took place. Cooperative enquiry is a form of action research in which people with a common interest look at particular aspects of their lives (in this case, adoption). This kind of research values personal experience and the purposeful sharing of experiences and feelings through stories and other creative ways such as music.

Chapter Six is entitled *A guide to co-operative inquiry for the adoption community*. Although this has been written with the adoption community in mind, it also provides a clear set of general instructions on how to undertake cooperative enquiry and is therefore a useful tool for anyone interested in this kind of research.

However, for me, the primary value of this excellent book lies in the telling of stories which may, in many other circumstances, be too hard to tell. Adoptive, permanent care and foster parents of troubled children are likely to find this book validating of their experiences and feelings.

Reviewed by:

Dr Cas O'Neill

*Dr Cas O'Neill
Research Fellow
School of Social Work
University of Melbourne*

*President
Post Placement Support Service (Vic) Inc.*

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