

Contact with their past can give children a sense of belonging

Transcript

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There's two reasons we have contact. In the first instance, it's because a child has been removed from its parents care, or its primary carer's care and we have to conduct a period of parental capacity assessment, and contact with the birth parent contributes to that parental capacity assessment. If they're not able to return home, or if they weren't already placed in kinship - into the care of extended family members - then we need to place children permanently and even if they're with extended family members and kinship carers, then we need to then think about the purpose of contact, post permanence away from the parents' care. And that makes us think about things like how does the ongoing contact promote the child's welfare and self esteem? How do we make sure that contact doesn't interfere with a child being able to put down roots in the new placement and being able to see friends do after school clubs. So contact at that point is about maintaining the child's sense of identity, helping them understand their life story about where they came from. And where it's appropriate and when it's in their best interests, to keep up contact in one form or another either remotely or directly with people in their family of origin.

It's no longer good enough that we just remove children out of one family and put them in another – that's quite an old-fashioned view of permanence away from home. It's much more about seeing that child as part of an extended network of care and concern. Because we know that when children get older, especially with the rise of social media, we can't control who they go and search for. But the more information that they've got from a young age, the more normalised the situation becomes for them, then the less likely they're going to be to go off in harmful ways and seek out potentially harmful adults from their family of origin.

The role that birth families and the extended family play in giving permission to the child to settle in a new home is absolutely crucial to their sense of security and being given permission to build relationships with their new carers. That's why it's important and it might not be for all children, that they can have that direct contact with other families, there's just too much damage, too much animosity, too much difficulty. But even when that's the case, we still need to find ways of keeping the connection so that when children

are old enough to make decisions about who they speak to and who they chase, that that task doesn't become onerous for them, and that they can do that in a supported way. Adults now trying to find birth families, it can be an horrendous task, if they're able to at all. And that's a human rights issue, really. So yeah, we need to be able to maintain the links and the connections in a way that protects the child through childhood, but that if it's the right thing, gives them the options then as adults to reopen the door on that whole history.

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