

Family Time and Open Adoption

When a child or young person (child) is adopted, their relationships with family continue. Ongoing contact and connection with a child's family plays a vital role in the child's development of identity, sense of belonging, and connection to their heritage and culture. Carers should be supported to see adoption, not as the end of a child's ties with their family, but as the coming together of two families to surround a child with love and connection.

A case plan goal of adoption should only be pursued and approved if carers have demonstrated their ability to support ongoing family time between the child and their family. Once a child is adopted, the adoptive parents are responsible for making the family time happen so a child can remain connected their family and their culture.

Birth family is more than birth parents and siblings, a child needs to be connected to their family network - grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, godparents, and kin.

Open Adoption Plans

The arrangements for how the child will stay connected to family and culture after an adoption order is made, are detailed in an open adoption plan. The plan is developed during the OOHC open adoption process between the carers, the child, the family, and other significant people in the child's life. If a child is Aboriginal or has a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background, cultural consultation must occur during the development of the plan.

Family time, as set out in the plan, may include letters, phone calls, visits, as well as more creative strategies like texting and enjoying online games together.

If your PSP Service Provider is not an approved adoption agency, an independent adoption assessor will be appointed to undertake the OOHC open adoption assessment and draft the open adoption plan.

Key Elements of an Open Adoption Plan

There are a few key elements that an adoption plan must include. These are:

- A statement about how family time between the child and their family will be maintained, including who will spend time with the child, the purpose, the frequency, and location.
- Details of the ways the child will be supported to develop a healthy and positive cultural identity and the ways a child's links to their cultural heritage will be fostered.
- A description of the type of information that will be shared under the plan and how often it will be shared.
- Details of any financial or other assistance that the Secretary has agreed to be included in the plan under [section 201 \(2\) of the Adoption Act 2001](#).

Once finalised, a copy of the open adoption plan is given to the child's parents and carers.

Top tips for developing an effective Open Adoption Plan

- Make sure the plan is based on the child's wishes and needs, rather than those of the adults in the child's life.
- Prompt the child's family to think more broadly about who their child could maintain connections with, after an adoption order is made. Encourage them to think about aunts, uncles, relatives from blended families (like step siblings), significant members of the child's community, and other kin.
- Be specific and state the type and frequency of planned activities and who is responsible for facilitating connections.
- Also incorporate wording which allows for flexibility as the child's needs change.

For more information see: [Considering Open Adoption \(non-Aboriginal Children Only\)](#), [Open Adoption and the Court](#) and the DCJ fact sheets [What is an Adoption Plan](#), and [Guide to drafting an adoption plan](#).

Registering an Open Adoption Plan

An adoption plan can be 'registered' with the court, which gives it the effect of being part of the legal adoption order, and enforceable.

If the child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, it is DCJ policy to request the Supreme Court register the open adoption plan, as an extra step in promoting the child's ongoing connection with family, community, and culture. NSW adoption legislation also directs

that open adoption plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must be made after consultation with a local, community-based, and relevant cultural organisation.

Open adoption plans can be registered for other children. These decisions are made on a case-by-case basis.

Regardless of whether an open adoption is registered or unregistered, the DCJ Adoption Information Unit can be contacted by any party to the adoption plan, if there are any worries the plan is not being followed. The Unit can help to mediate any issues or misunderstandings.

For more information, see [Open Adoption and Aboriginal Children](#) and the DCJ fact sheets [Registration of adoption plans](#) and [Guide to drafting a registered adoption plan](#).

Supporting Family Time during the Adoption Process

It is understandable that carers, families, and the child may have conflicting and strong feelings about adoption. These feelings can be difficult to disguise during family time. Despite best intentions, it may be hard for the adults to stay focused on the best interests of the child when they feel scared and emotional. Carers may be worried about how the child's family is feeling about the adoption. They might be angry that the family is not supportive of the adoption or, if the family are supportive, feel that they must agree to all family time requests so they don't change their minds. Families may be concerned that adoption will mean the end of family time and grieving the chance of ever having their child restored. The child may be participating in family time whilst processing their own thoughts and feelings about what it will mean to be adopted and being concerned about the feelings of the adults in their lives.

Though participating in family time during the adoption process can be challenging, it's an opportunity for everyone to think about what they want family time to look like in the open adoption plan and how it meets the child's needs.

The support you offer will depend on each child, carer and family's unique needs, hopes and fears, strengths and challenges. You can best support them by:

- Being equipped with knowledge and understanding about OOHC open adoption. If a child, carer, or parent has a question you can't answer, consult with a permanency coordinator or adoption caseworker.
- Actively listening and appropriately responding to the worries or challenges the child, their parents or carers are experiencing.
- Helping them understand the worries and challenges of other parties in the adoption process.

- Remaining open and transparent throughout the adoption process.

To help manage family time during the adoption process, you could:

- increase structured activities during family time, rather than ‘free play’. This can help parents manage difficult questions from their child, yet keep time focused on activities that connect the parents and child
- offer more support to the carers in managing family time. This gives you an opportunity to model for them how to get the most out of family time
- check in with the adoption assessor to understand how the adoption assessment process might be impacting on the quality of family time. Seek advice from the assessor about how family time could be improved.

Resources that may help you to support family time include:

- [Relationship Based Practice](#)
- [Difficult Conversations with Children, Families and Carers - Tips and Guidance](#)
- [Family Time \(Contact\)- Practice Tips](#)
- [Relaxation Techniques](#)
- [How can I de-escalate a situation when someone is angry or agitated?](#)
- [Conflict management for parents](#)
- [Services for adopted children under 18 years and their families](#)

For more information see [Supporting Carers through an Open Adoption Process](#), [Supporting Parents through an Open Adoption Process](#), [Supporting Children through an Open Adoption Process](#), [Life Story Work and Open Adoption](#).