

# Supporting a Carer Through the Open Adoption Process

Carers are often worried the process of adopting the child or young person (child) in their care will be long and emotional. There are challenges, but the rewards for the child and carer are lifelong. There are practical things you can do to support carers at all stages of the adoption process. You play a key role in supporting the carer during the adoption process.

You will provide direct support to carers during the open adoption process by:

- explaining permanent placement options and the benefits of each, for the carer and child
- supporting the carer to have conversations with the child about permanent placement options
- having non-judgmental and honest conversations with the carer about whether open adoption is the best case plan goal for the child, and whether they can, want, or should adopt the child in their care
- helping the carer build their capacity and confidence to become a suitable prospective adoptive parent, such as their attitudes to openness in adoption
- helping the carer understand the impact of the adoption process on the child and the child's family
- facilitating difficult conversations between the child's family and the carer
- helping the carer understand the adoption process
- updating the carer on the progress of an adoption application
- listening and responding to the challenges the carer experiences during the process.

The carer will also have access to support and information, through:

- Attend a two day seminar 'Core Training' – gives carers an opportunity to explore whether adoption might be suitable for their family, to hear from experienced adoptive parents, and understand more about adoptive parenting, openness in adoption and the adoption process.
- [My Forever Family online library and training](#) – offers information, support, and advice about topics such as out-of-home care (OOHC) open adoption, trauma, Life Story work, and attachment.

- Your District Adoption Caseworker and either DCJ Open Adoption and Permanency Services (OAPS) or an Accredited Adoption Agency - who will be available to provide support and advice at every stage of the adoption process.
- [DCJ Post Adoption Information Unit](#) – helps carers and families to share information with each other after an adoption order is made and find solutions to challenges with family time arrangements.
- Universal services – such as [Family Tax Benefit](#), [National Disability Insurance Scheme](#), and access to [raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au) information like [Raising adopted children](#).

## Supporting Relationships Between Birth Families and Adoptive Families

Helping to build a trusting relationship between the child's birth and carer family is a key part of your casework during the adoption process. Families may have feelings of anger and grief about the adoption of their child. Carers may feel concerned about how to support the child's ongoing relationship with their family after an adoption order is made. Helping to build these relationships starts from the time the child comes into care and will take time.

When helping carers to 'lean in' to a child's family, you will need to:

- actively listen to the carer's worries
- show and encourage compassion for the child's family by helping the carer explore:
  - the challenges the child's family have faced, which resulted in the child no longer being in their care
  - the worries the child's family might have about adoption, such as not being able to see their child anymore and/or their child's name changing
  - the power imbalance that exists between the carer family (having the child in their care) and the child's family (who are reliant on the carers to see their child)
  - their role to influence connections between the child and their parents, siblings, and other people important to the child
  - help them understand the importance of family time for the child's sense of identity and ongoing wellbeing
  - emphasise that speaking positively about a child's family builds the child's sense of security, belonging, identity, and self-esteem. Evidence shows that

positive relationships formed between carers and families contribute to improved outcomes for children.

For more information, see: [Family Time and Open Adoption](#), [Supporting a Family through the Open Adoption Process](#), and [Supporting a Child through the Open Adoption Process](#).

## Changes in Circumstances

During the adoption process, tasks like Family Finding and confirming the child's paternity and culture/s continue to take place (where required), to make sure that adoption remains the most appropriate case plan goal. Sometimes new information can result in changes to the child's care plan. It's hard to predict what this information might be, or what effect it will have on the adoption process, but it can create worry and uncertainty for carer. You can support carers to manage this by:

- listening to the carer's worries
- being open and honest throughout the adoption process
- assuring the carer that you will keep them updated about new information as soon as you can
- supporting the carer to understand what the new information may mean i.e., introducing the child to a family member and how to provide the child with new information
- exploring the benefits for the child in knowing more about their family, culture, and history.

## OOHC Open Adoption Assessments

It's common for carers to be curious or frustrated about the need to participate in an adoption assessment when they have already participated in a carer authorisation process.

Some of the paperwork carers are asked to provide, and questions they will be asked in the adoption assessment, will seem repetitive of the carer authorisation process. You can support them to actively participate in the adoption assessment by explaining:

- NSW adoption legislation requires that the assessment happen
- information the carers gave as part of the carer authorisation process may no longer be current, and therefore need to be asked again

- all other court orders for children in OOHC are made in the Children’s Court. An adoption order is made in the Supreme Court
- the Supreme Court needs a lot of evidence to be confident to make an adoption order, which is the most permanent and only lifelong permanency decision that can be made for a child in NSW.

The assessment process is also likely to be a time of uncertainty for the carer, who may worry about things like:

- sharing personal information with someone (the assessor) they don’t know very well
- personal information of theirs being in a report that will be shared with the parents
- the assessor speaking with their other children about their views on this adoption
- other household members having to provide personal information,
- saying things to the assessor they think will upset the child’s family
- the child’s parents or siblings saying something to the assessor that will stop an adoption happening.

You can support a carer through an adoption assessment by:

- being equipped with knowledge about the process, for example, being able to reassure a carer that personal and sensitive information not related to the adoption decision will be redacted from the copy of the assessment report given to other parties
- explaining the purpose of the open adoption assessment and its place in the adoption process
- actively listening and appropriately responding to the worries or challenges they are experiencing
- helping carers understand the worries and challenges of other parties in the adoption process
- remaining open and transparent throughout the adoption process,
- asking the adoption caseworker to join you and the carers in a conversation to answer the carer’s questions
- referring the carer to read more information on OOHC Open Adoption on the [DCJ website](#).

For more information, see: [OOHC Open Adoption Assessment](#) and [Open Adoption and the Court](#).

## Adoption Plan

During the adoption assessment, the assessor will negotiate with the carers, child (where age appropriate), the parents, siblings, and other significant people about how the child will remain connected with them. This includes family time, exchanging information, maintaining cultural connections, and the name the child will be known by, should an adoption order be made. These arrangements will form part of an adoption plan.

Carers can be worried about how they will fit family time into the child's and their busy schedule. They can also be worried about how to manage a situation where the child doesn't want to see a family member. It can be helpful to help carers see the similarities between prioritising time with the child's family and time spent with other important extended family members in their lives. Carers can be supported to understand their position in influencing the quality of and attitude about family time and to make it a part of their usual life.

Carers should not be pushed to agree to any arrangements they do not feel they can manage following adoption. However, carers should be open to accommodating requests and exploring creative ways for the child to maintain connections. If a carer is struggling to come up with ideas about how to do this, it should be explored in the adoption assessment.

Carers can ask the child curious questions and openly speak with the child about family time, for example:

- “Shall we send Mum a photo of the drawing you did at school today?”
- “It was sad Mum wasn't feeling well and couldn't see you today. Shall we send her a text/email saying you missed her, hope she is feeling better soon, and you look forward to seeing her next time?”

The Supreme Court will want evidence the family time arrangements outlined in the adoption plan have been working for the child, carer, and the child's family for some time to feel confident the adoption plan will be successful. You can support a carer before the adoption plan is drafted by:

- reviewing the current care plan family time arrangements, to make sure they are working for the child, parents, siblings, and carer. You may need to change the arrangements if they are not working
- identifying if there are other family members e.g., siblings who should be included in the current care plan and negotiate family time or information exchange arrangements
- listening to carers' worries about family time. Remind them of the importance to the child of maintaining connections with family members. Discuss ways they can manage their worries. Remind them family time can happen in many ways
- assuring the carer that family time arrangements need to be manageable and right for the child and their changing needs as they grow older
- ensuring the **cultural plan** is completed before the adoption assessment begins and updated when new family members are located, or new information is learned
- discussing with the carer and child, the name they would like the child to be known by should an adoption happen. It is common for the child to take on the surname of the carers and retain their birth surname as a middle name or hyphenated birth and carer surname. The child's first name should not change unless there is a very good reason to do so. The parents' wishes should be considered when deciding on the child's name after an open adoption.

### **Practice example: Moses, James, Freyer, and Augusto**

Moses is 11. He loves soccer, reading Harry Potter books, and geography. Moses has lived with James and Freyer Price since he was just over 1 year old. Moses was removed from his father, Augusto Carro, after his mother died in a car accident and in his grief, Augusto relapsed with amphetamine use and alcohol binges. Moses has family time with Augusto and his paternal grandparents, Sara, and Ahmed, every second month and around Moses' birthday at Sara and Ahmed's house.

Moses was adopted by James and Freyer. When Moses, James and Freyer were asked what name will appear on Moses' new birth certificate, they talked it over, and together they decided on Moses Carro-Price. James and Freyer wanted to keep Moses' birth surname name as a permanent part of his identity. They wanted Moses to feel a permanent connection to both of his families, and for Moses to feel proud of his names and his journey. Moses wanted his dad and grandparents to know that even though he was being adopted, he loved them and their time together.

For more information, see: [Family Time and Open Adoption](#), [Open Adoption Process \(non-Aboriginal Children Only\)](#), and the DCJ fact sheets [What is an Adoption Plan](#), [Guide to drafting an adoption plan](#), [Registration of an open adoption plans](#), [Guide to drafting an open adoption plan](#), and [Integrated Birth Certificate](#).

## Contested Adoptions

Many parents will not want to consent to their child's adoption. Some may not agree that restoration is no longer a possibility. Others may feel comfortable with and accepting of their child's current placement with their carers but worry that adoption will impact on the family time arrangements or give the child some indication that they do not love them or wish to have them back in their care. Some will want to take the extra step of formally contesting the adoption order being made in the Supreme Court.

This can be a particularly stressful time for prospective adoptive parents. You, OAPS, or an Accredited Adoption Service Provider (AASP) will work together to support them, as well as everyone involved. You can support prospective adoptive parents by helping them understand:

- the process of a contested adoption,
- the potential outcomes
- each other's point of view
- areas of agreed understanding.

By finding agreed areas of understanding, you can help the prospective adoptive parents engage in meaningful discussion that may help to ease a parent's worry about adoption. This might result in the open adoption plan changing to increase family time, or a request that the Court register the adoption plan, so that the parent is confident that family time will continue. For more information, see: [Open Adoption and the Court](#) and [Supporting a Child through the Open Adoption Process](#), [Supporting a Parent Through the Open Adoption Process](#).