

An adopter blogs about her discussion with her children's birth mother about Letterbox and what she learned.

"Today I had the opportunity to interview a birth mother whilst being filmed for a project about the complex topic of letterbox contact. As a new adopter (as an fyi our completely adorable three-year old LO has been with us four weeks today and we're basking in what may or may not be a honeymoon period) they felt that I would be a good person to ask the questions a typical new adopter would ask a birth parent about contact if given the opportunity. It was indeed a good opportunity and I am grateful for it.

She has had three children taken into care and placed for adoption (in two separate placements). She has recently offered herself to the LA Adoption team to talk about her experiences, especially of this tricky area, and was open, frank although incredibly nervous as you could imagine. I know nothing of her 'story' and that, perhaps is key – my judgement of her past mistakes did not cloud our conversation on contact. In that sense this situation is absolutely unrepresentative of one of the biggest challenges to contact (more later). I also imagine every situation and contact dynamic is different so you must take what you will from this.

A few things stood out for me. Her contents of the letter we would write to her has an audience I had not even began to imagine. 25 relatives know the month that the letter should be received and around that time all will ask about the children they once knew. A child being taken into care is a very public event for many of those watching events unfold – aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings and so on. Even neighbours. For her, and for this wider group, the annual letter has become an *event* that is eagerly awaited. This means a late dispatch from adopters, caused perhaps by parenting pressures, holidays or avoidance, causes enormous anxiety as well as social pressure and her anxiety about why it may be late means she will call her SW repeatedly to chase it. Each letter received is placed in a special

box for repeated reading and sharing. The breadth of this network of trauma was sobering.

She was more relaxed than I would have given her credit for about the new 'privileges' afforded her children – taking pleasure in foreign holidays, ballet lessons and some of the accoutrements of what has been, in her case, her children's placement in the homes of the thoroughly middle-class. She wanted them to have what she didn't and she wanted to know about it. An adopters privileged sense of guilt was not useful to her. Equally she also wanted to know about their challenges. If they're struggling in school she wanted to know, if their behaviour is a challenge she wanted to know that too. As the years have gone on each letter has become harder for her as her children move further and further from her memories of them and into the characters we convey to her, so both the dark and the light of the pictures we paint in our letters help her keep those pictures alive.

I asked her about how she felt when adopters struggle to write a letter to someone whose behaviour they may blame for their children's loss and trauma and for whom they may feel nothing but anger – or worse. This caused pause for thought but, rightly or wrongly, I do not think she saw herself in that light. Our mutual conclusion was that it was for our children to sit in ultimate judgement and until they do, then we must honour the need to maintain letterbox contact to give them the full picture they will need to do so. Equally it is the task of the child to create a sense of who they are and a full and up to date picture is needed for that to become a meaningful exercise. She recognised that we will use our judgement on what and when we choose to share.

However, she also explained some of the many reasons why contact may be one-sided – if temporarily. Following her first two going into care her Mother, who had cared for them and was a party to the letterbox agreement, was simply unable, through guilt and grief, to complete her letters. Had we misread the reason for her silence and discontinued we would have been committing an injustice – one that we in turn may be judged by

our children for. It was clear that shame, guilt and trauma do not fade for birthparents as they so often do not for their children, and neither do chaotic lives honour commitments. However she would not condemn those adopters for whom this was too great a task. In this she was not 'on message' for the adoption team making the film.

We had both shared similar experiences in the final stages of the adoption process by meeting our counterparts (?) prior to placement and for both this had been invaluable, albeit heartrending experience, that transformed a school report into a pen portrait to fellow human beings – for both parties.

I know enough to know that no two situations are the same and I know that there are many emotions and anxieties that accompany letterbox – not least those of our children as they may exercise their own feelings on the issue. So whilst I am quite sure I am painting a picture that looks nothing like yours, and in this case apparently straightforward, having no counterbalance to what she told me I found this an invaluable opportunity to continue to transform a court order into a human being.”

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