

FAMILY MATTERS



CONTACT...TWO VIEWS REGARDING

An adoptive parent's considered perspective on Letterbox contact and a response from the adoption support team

Dear Ivor

I want to apologise to you and your colleagues for not having replied to several phone calls and a letter over the last six months, relating to letterbox.

In short, I don't want to participate in the letterbox scheme any more.

I know I signed up for it, and most importantly I know that I will have to explain myself to our children in future. But I feel that the letterbox scheme has served its purpose for us and, hopefully for the children's birth family; there is goodwill on both sides, and they are, I hope, reassured that the children are safe and loved, and growing up happily. The goodwill and openness on both sides will, I hope, be of great comfort to the children in the future.

We have not shared the letters with the children, nor do they know that there has been any contact. It's a judgement call, of course, and only time will tell whether it was the right one. But we feel it would have inhibited the children's peace of mind. We know who we are, all four of us, and how we came together; it's not as if we ever pretend that we are a biological family. But we are a family in every real sense of the word and that is something that we are proud of, and that we work at every day. Acknowledging that there is a birth family 'out there' is one thing. But I truly believe that in our case, being in touch would only disrupt our children's sense of reality and who they are and who they 'belong' with. My husband and I revisit the subject regularly, and remain convinced that it would not be in our children's interests to see the letters yet. The right time will no doubt arise, and I trust we'll remain alert to it.

I'm explaining this so that you see ceasing to write letters would not affect our children right now; by the time they know about the letters, I trust they will be old enough to hear our explanation for why we no longer wish to continue.

In short, the reason is quite simply that writing to the children's birth family makes us feel as if the children are less ours, as if they are only on loan to us, and we are caretakers, not parents. And frankly, anything that makes us feel that way is counterproductive to us as a family. Raising children is challenging enough in the most 'normal' of circumstances. Adoption makes it all the more challenging, in all the ways we were forewarned about and many more besides, as of course you know. To be the best parents we can be, we need to keep focus and remain utterly

committed to our children and our family. This is a relatively easy thing most of the time, and incredibly challenging some of the time. It doesn't do us any good to throw into the mix an obligation to send an annual report about how it's going and perhaps selfishly, but realistically - anything that doesn't 'do us good' hinders our ability to focus on our family.

Not least is the fact that as the children get older, the repercussions of their early life and adoption are becoming more apparent. I was very honest and open in the letters I have written to date. How, now, should I explain the various behavioural and learning difficulties the children now struggle with?

I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I get angry at the very idea of writing cheery letters, but anything more honest just isn't appropriate or, I feel, useful for the birth family.

I don't want to give the impression to you that we are struggling. This is normal life, and we are working hard and also really enjoying ourselves. I just can't write the letters at the moment. I'd be very happy to email you every year, in September, which is our letterbox time, and tell you that all is well, so that you can reassure the birth family, and give them our heartfelt good wishes, if you would be willing to do this? I trust that you'll keep any letters for the children safely, so that they can come to you for them when the time is right; if the birth family is generous enough to go on writing.

I expect the children to want to meet everyone in the years ahead, and am keen to keep the line open, through you.

I'm sorry to have taken so long to explain myself and I hereby undertake to respond to any further missives from you! Please know, too, that we will continue to revisit this subject, no doubt regularly, and this isn't necessarily a forever decision.

Very best wishes, Adoptive mother

(published with permission and all names removed)



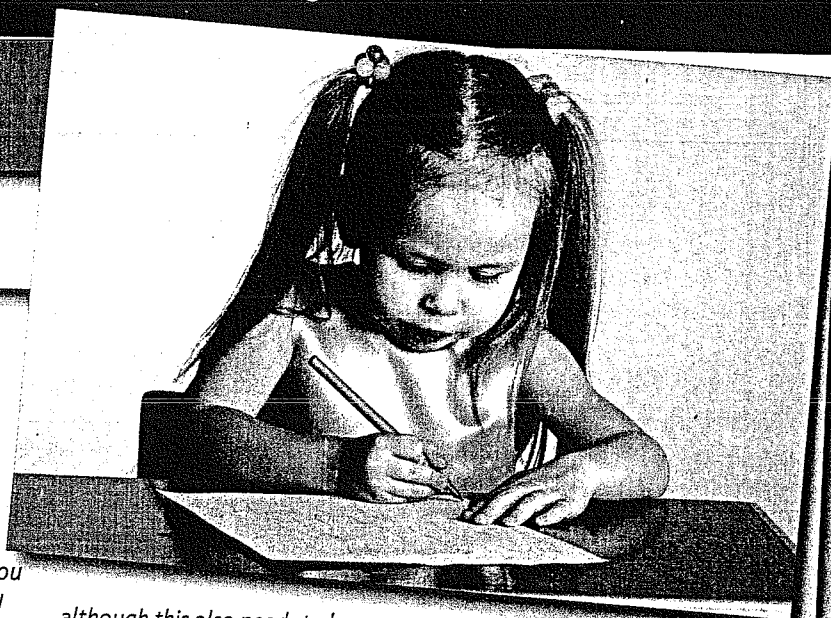
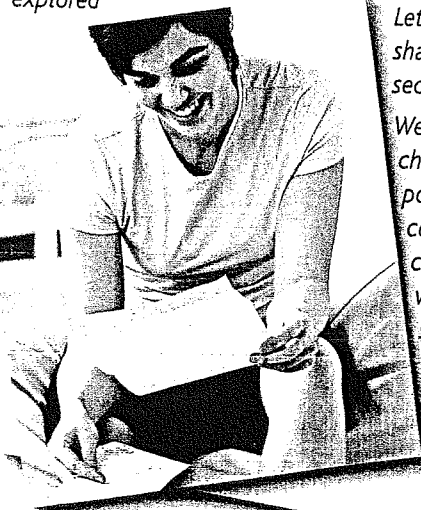
LETTERBOX

A response from Ivor Milner

Thank you for your email regarding your children's Letterbox exchange. It is clear that you have given the matter a lot of thought and I appreciate the time you have taken to explain your views. I am sorry for the delay in getting back to you but I wanted to give a considered response to the points you raise.

As the parents, you must do what you consider to be in their best interest and it is clear you have not taken the decision to withdraw from Letterbox lightly. We generally advise parents to involve their children, as much as possible, with the Letterbox exchange but acknowledge that each situation is different and there may be good reasons why this is not appropriate.

The aim of Letterbox is not to undermine the relationships within the adoptive family but to maintain a link between the two families for information to be shared. This should reduce the risk of fantasies developing on both sides. In my experience many adopted children have feelings and questions relating to their birth family which Letterbox can help to address. It can also help adopted children develop a better understanding of their history and sense of self. The annual exchange of letters provides the opportunity for some of these issues to be explored



although this also needs to be an ongoing process.

I appreciate that it can be difficult to provide a full account of what has been happening over the year and there is a tendency for any challenges or obstacles to be glossed over in Letterbox letters to birth family members. It can be equally difficult to receive letters from birth family members who have "moved on" with their lives and where there is little or no acknowledgement of the damage their previous actions may have caused the children. These are a constant challenge for all of us involved in Letterbox and we are always happy to discuss such issues with participants. I understand that some of the letters from the children's birth family have been quite emotional in content and I realise that this can make sharing the letters a lot more difficult.

Many adopted people decide to make enquires about their birth relatives when they reach adulthood. Their experience of Letterbox and the information shared can provide them with a securer base from which to do so.

We have not yet advised your children's birth family of your position but will do so in due course. They will be invited to continue to send in annual letters which, should they choose to do so, will be held on file and shared with your children, along with other Letterbox information, if they every

apply to access their adoption records when they are adults. I feel I must mention that the birth family may seek legal advice although I think it unlikely any court would, in the circumstances, instruct you to continue to provide an annual letter. I welcome your suggestion of an annual email and I would be happy to relay the contents to the birth family members

Your email is actually quite timely in that contact and Letterbox are the focus of our next Family Matters Newsletter (Spring edition) which is currently at the printers and should be circulated within the next few weeks. When you receive your copy you will see that the emphasis is on promoting contact and Letterbox and highlighting the benefits. You are not alone in having a different experience and perspective which, I think, is equally valid.

I would like to reiterate how much I appreciate the thought, time and effort that you have given to this matter. Too often adopters withdraw from Letterbox without giving their reasons for doing so. It is clear the children remain your priority and that you have taken your responsibilities seriously. I would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised should you wish to do so and I hope you will continue to make use of the other services provided by my team.

Ivor Milner

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