

Children's Contact With Birth Parents

For grandparents raising grandchildren, the amount of parental contact desired will vary from situation to situation. Contact with the children's birth parents will affect the children's well being. In some cases, for the good, especially if they are to live with their parents again, but in some cases it may be best to limit contact or only have supervised contact with the children. There are no simple rules about contact with the birth parents as each situation is unique and involves the grandparent, the birth parent and the grandchildren. Here are some suggestions for good practices regarding birth-parent contact with the children.

To begin, let's take a look at the individuals involved and consider the circumstances.

The Birth Parents

1. *Is the parent physically available?*

In some situations, such as military deployment, incarceration, or death, the birth parent(s) may not be available for visitation. There are also geographic considerations that have to be taken into account where travel may be necessary.



2. *Is the parent mentally and emotionally available?*

Parents with mental or emotional difficulties may not interact with their children the way they could if they were healthy. In some circumstances, such as if the parent was intoxicated or drug induced, it would be better for the children not to see the parents at all or have the visit stopped.

3. *Is the parent predictable?*

Some parents are more responsible than others. When a parent does not show up for a scheduled visit it is very hard on the children. Grandparents need to help the children understand that their parents may not come without speaking negatively of the birth parent.

The Grandparent

1. *How does the grandparent feel about the birth parent and child visitation?*

Due to the reasons the grandparents are raising their grandchildren, they may not want the birth parent to have visitation. This could be due to many reasons, such as former abuse of the child, the parent's drug habits, troubled relations between the grandparent and the birth parent, and/or the belief that the visitation would upset the grandchild.

2. *Can the grandparent facilitate the visitation?*

There are many factors involved in arranging the visit. Can the grandparent transport the grandchild, is there long distance travel involved, if the grandparent is still working—is there the time for the visit? These factors must be considered before arrangements can be made.

The Grandchild

1. *How does the child feel about seeing his/her birth parent(s)?*

Children have different feelings about seeing their birth parents. Some anticipate and want to see their parents while others wish to have no contact at all. Grandparents need to think carefully about their grandchildren's feelings before arranging a visit.

2. *What meeting times and locations are best for the child?*

When deciding times, the grandchild's schedule should be taken into consideration. The location will also have an influence on the meeting. The grandparent should consider whether meeting at home versus a neutral location would be best.

3. *How often should the child see his/her birth parent?*

When deciding meeting times, the grandparents should consider the child's age, relationship to the parent, and the reaction to the previous visit. Younger children need more frequent contact to maintain a relationship whereas older children may desire more frequent contact.

The Legal Situation

1. *Has there been a legal decision about contact? (To prohibit or require contact)*
2. *Are there institutional rules that determine contact? (Such as prison visitation schedules)*
3. *What is the context of the visit?*

References

Clyman, R; Harden, B; Little, C (2002) "Assessment, Intervention, and Research with Infants in Out-of-Home Placement." *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 23, p. 435-453.

University of Wisconsin Extension, (2003) "Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Children's Contact With Their Parents" B3786-7.

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Tips for Birth Parent and Child Visitation

1. Make the visitation part of the child's routine.
2. Plan visits ahead of time.
3. Help the child follow through with promises of visitation or other contact.
4. Make clear to the birth parent the expectations for the visit.
5. Give the child the opportunity to express how he/she feels after the visitation (or lack thereof if the parent does not show).
6. Do not criticize the birth parent in front of the child.

Alternatives to Visitation

Grandparents are often placed in the middle of the visitation issues. Having a case worker or other family member help with the arrangements for face to face visitation may ease the burden on the grandparent. Sometime, alternatives to visitation is needed. Depending on the child's age other suggestions for contact include drawing pictures, sending letters, receiving phone calls, and taking and sending photographs. Emails and videos are also ways to keep in contact without face to face contact.