



QUEEN'S
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Open Adoption

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Adoption in Northern Ireland

- ▶ 84 children adopted from care in 2017/18
- ▶ Average age at last care admission 1yr 6mths
- ▶ Average time to adoption 3yrs 2mths
- ▶ Average age at adoption 4yrs 2mths
- ▶ Most (78) adopted by their foster carers
- ▶ 46% adopted as a sibling group



Imagining more open adoption

- ▶ The almost universal use of letterbox as a means for adopted children to stay in touch with their birth parents does need to be questioned, and there is scope for considering face-to-face contact in a greater number of cases. (Neil, 2018)
- ▶ “The world has moved on, yet we, that is the courts and social work practice, still hold to life-story work and letterbox contact as setting the 'right' level of post-adoption contact in most cases... a higher level of contact, or a level of direct contact that develops slowly during childhood..., may well be better for these young people in the longer term.” (McFarlane, 2018)



International perspectives

- ▶ The case in New South Wales, Australia
- ▶ Increased use of open adoption as a permanence option for children in care
- ▶ During 2016/17, 131 of the 143 adoptions by carers in Australia were in NSW
- ▶ Children typically adopted by current foster carers
- ▶ NSW Adoption Act 2000 - adoption plans must include details of contact arrangements, - a legally enforceable contract.
- ▶ Contact orders usually specify four face-to-face contact visits a year
- ▶ (see e.g. Luu et al, 2018)



UK regional variation in contact

- ▶ **Wales Adoption Study:** (Meakings et al, 2018)
 - ▶ plans for contact - questionnaire to 96 adoptive parents
 - ▶ letterbox – all but one
 - ▶ face-to-face birth parent contact – none
 - ▶ face-to-face sibling contact - 24% of those with siblings elsewhere
- ▶ **England Yorkshire and Humberside survey:** (Neil et al, 2018)
 - ▶ actual contact - questionnaire to 319 adoptive parents
 - ▶ letterbox – 66%
 - ▶ face-to-face birth parent – 3%
 - ▶ face-to-face sibling - 25% of those with siblings elsewhere
- ▶ **Northern Ireland:** (MacDonald, 2017)
 - ▶ actual contact – questionnaire to 93 adoptive parents
 - ▶ letter box – 52%
 - ▶ face-to-face birth parents – 65%
 - ▶ face-to-face with sibling – 53%



Open adoption in Northern Ireland

- ▶ “It appears to us that where such contact is likely to benefit the child, it should only exceptionally be denied”
- ▶ *Re J L-P’s Application* [2004] NICA 35

- ▶ ‘The Enquiry heard the picture in relation to direct contact is very different in Northern Ireland where judges may recommend such contact takes place, sometimes between four to six times a year.’

(Featherstone et al, 2018)



Supporting and resourcing contact

- ▶ ‘Birth relative contact continues to generate professional disquiet, highlighting the difficulty of upholding the child’s right to this dual connection in a way that does not compromise their well-being.’
 - ▶ (MacDonald & McLoughlin, 2016)
- ▶ Adoptive parents and social workers expressed concerns about the automatic assumption of facilitating direct contact at this frequency given the context of inadequate support services.’
 - ▶ (Featherstone et al, 2018)



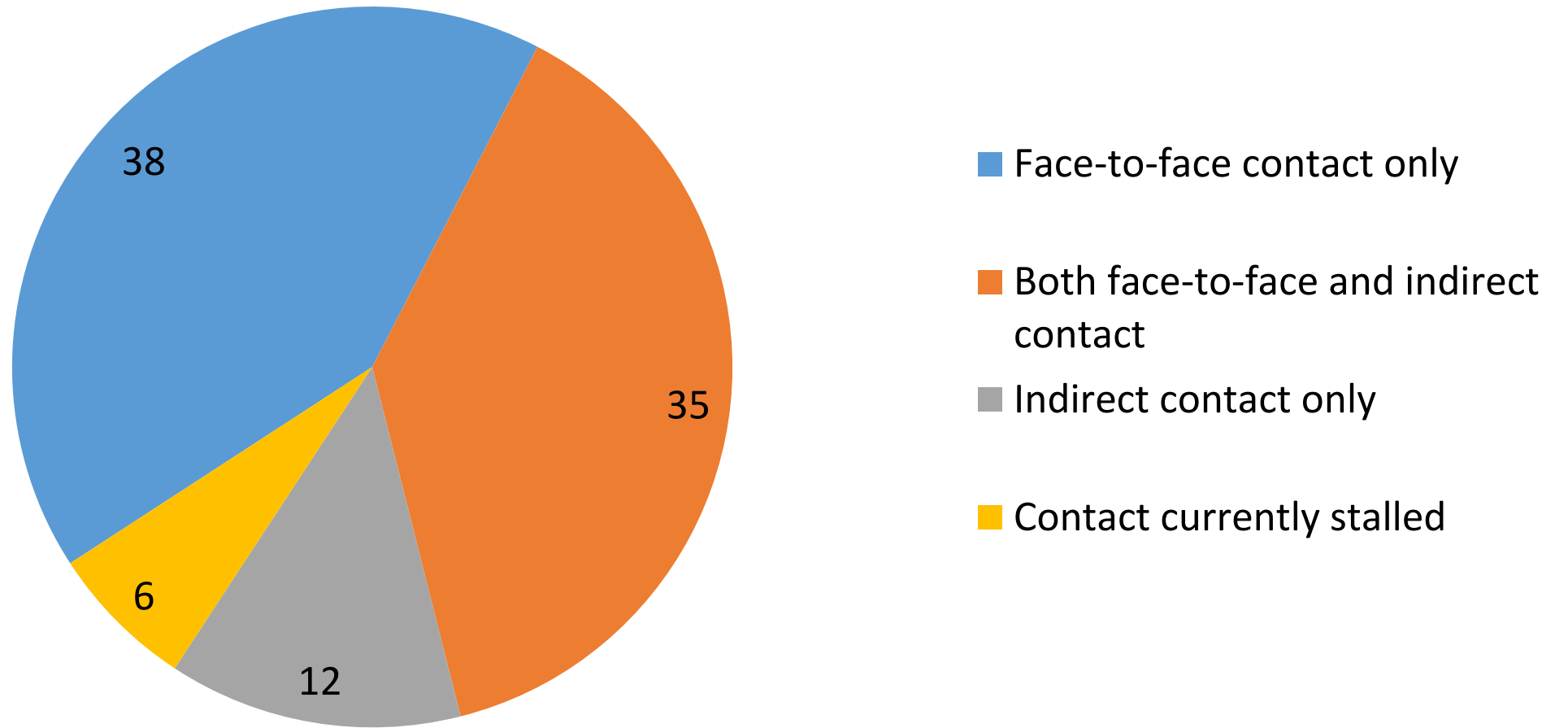
NI study

- ▶ All members of Adoption UK in NI (approx. 533 families) were invited.
- ▶ 26 adoptive parents took part in 4 separate focus groups.
- ▶ 93 adoptive parents who had post-adoption contact completed online survey.
- ▶ Our questions:
 - ▶ What is the nature and extent of post-adoption contact in Northern Ireland?
 - ▶ What are the challenges and benefits for adoptive families?
 - ▶ What support for contact do adoptive parents use and how helpful is it?

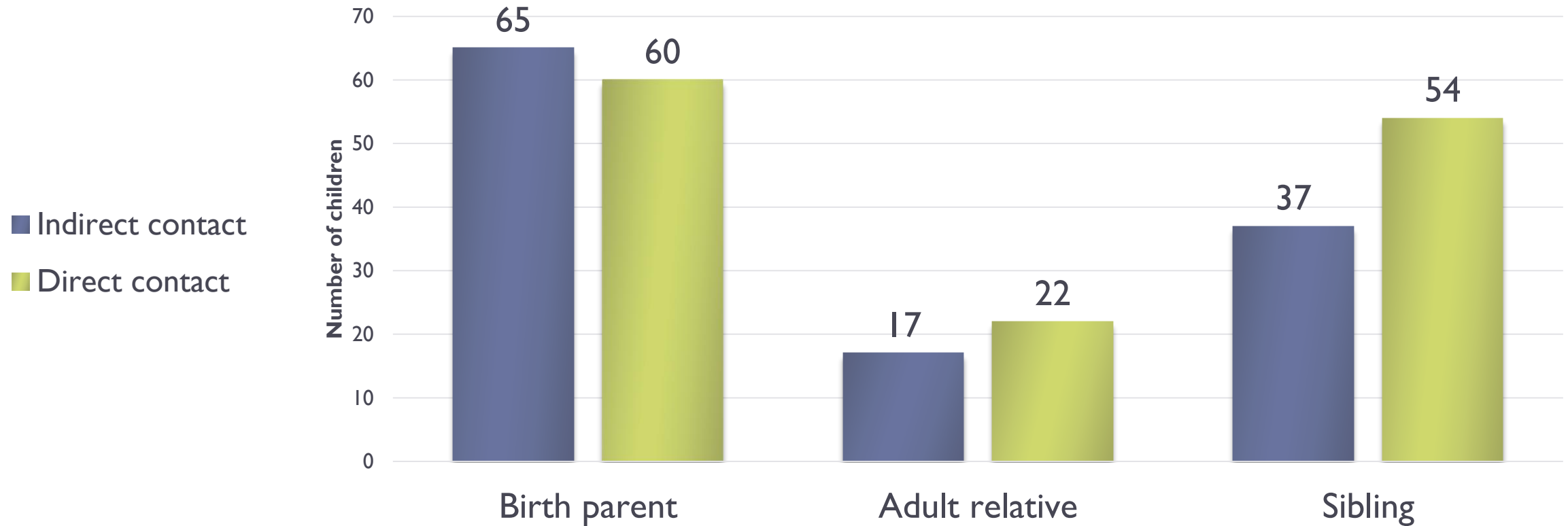
(MacDonald, 2017)

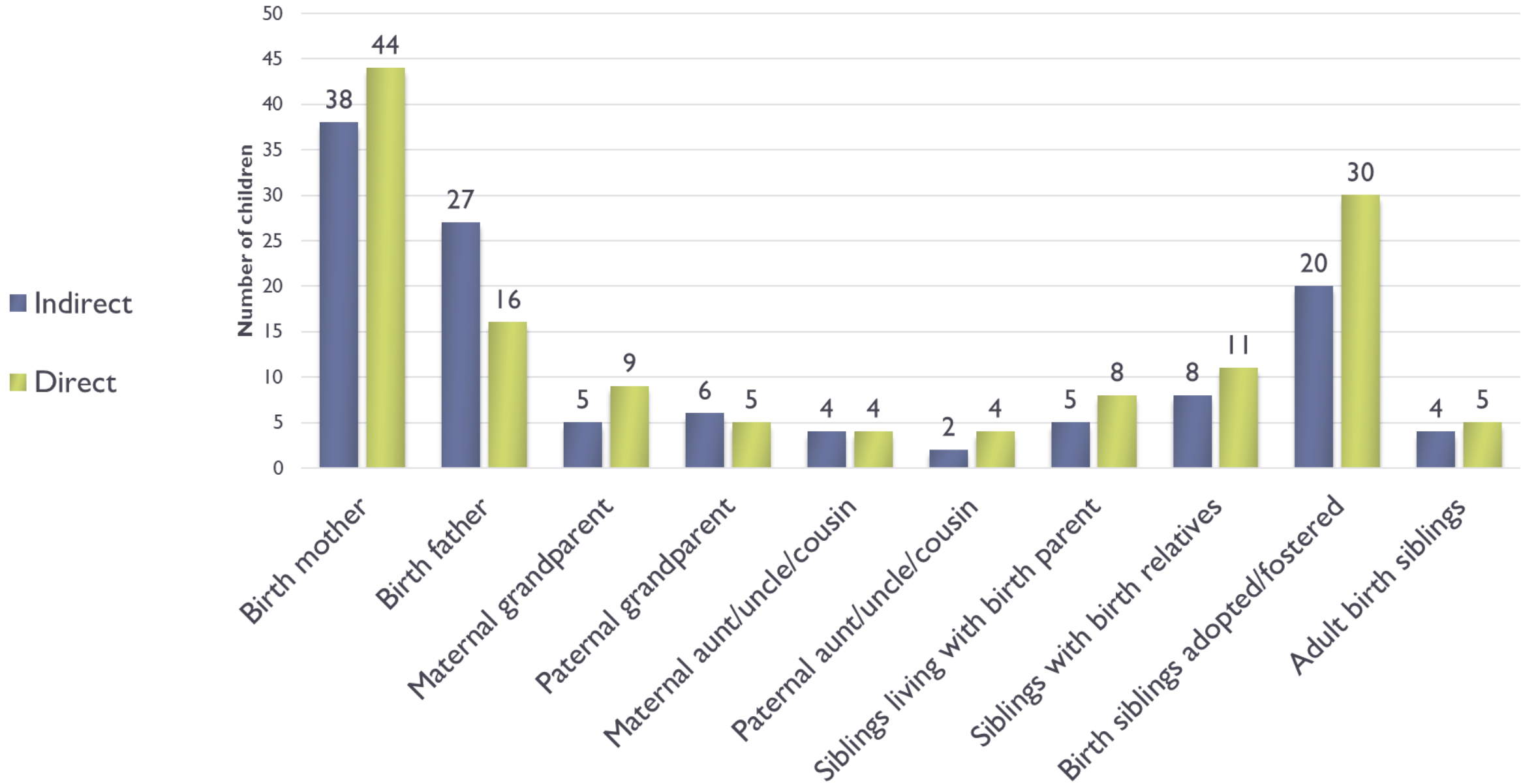


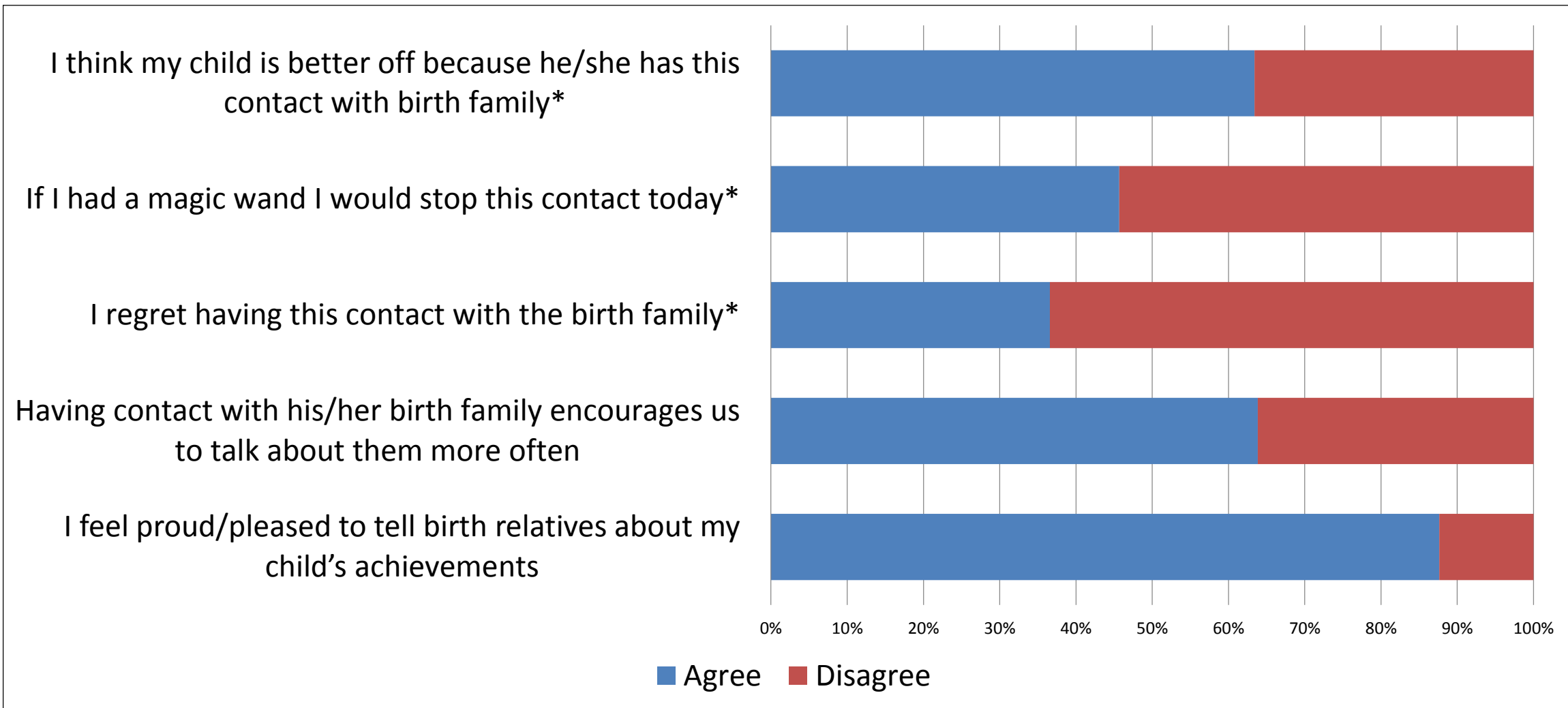
Number of children having various types of contact



Who was this contact with?







Benefits of contact

Helps children make sense of their situation

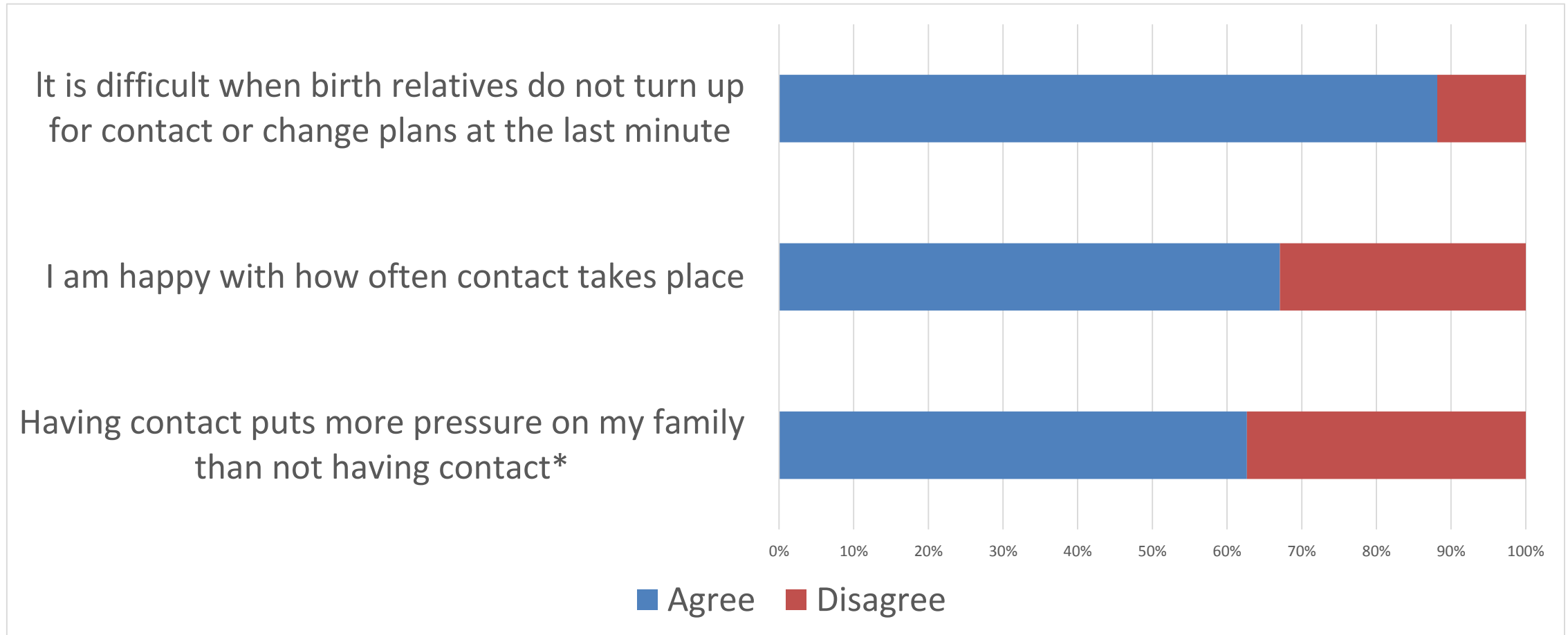
- ▶ *“there are no secrets, there is no intrigue... they don't fill in the voids with fantasy information.”*
- ▶ *“it debunks the whole myth that birth mum is this perfect person... she gets to see birth mum warts and all.”*

However...

- ▶ *“Creates an illusion that the birth father would be kind, caring and capable of looking after them. Contact visits... are made up of fun, treats and presents, what child doesn't want these. But creates illusions of birth family life.”*



The practical challenges of contact



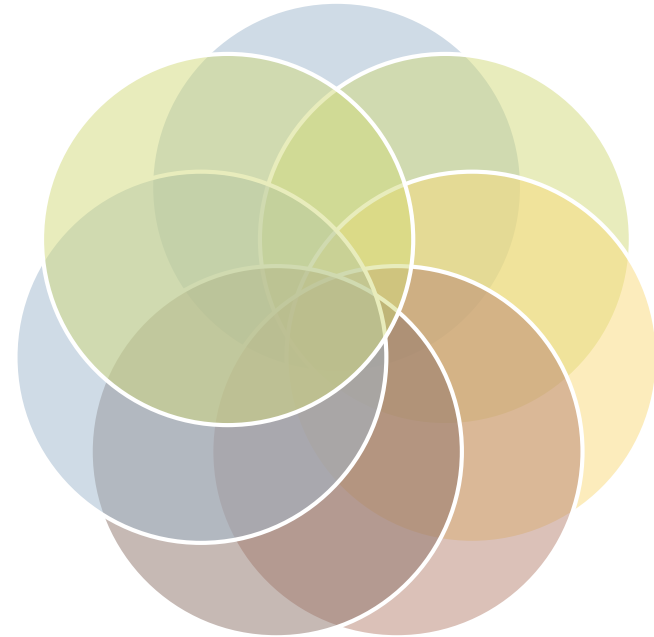
Multiple contact arrangements

- ▶ Most families had contact visits twice a year, but 28% (26) had more frequent meetings, up to twelve times a year.
- ▶ 18 children had separate plans for face-to-face contact with different birth relatives.
- ▶ Siblings created by adoption - in 28% of the families (26) there were 2 or more adopted children who were having contact.

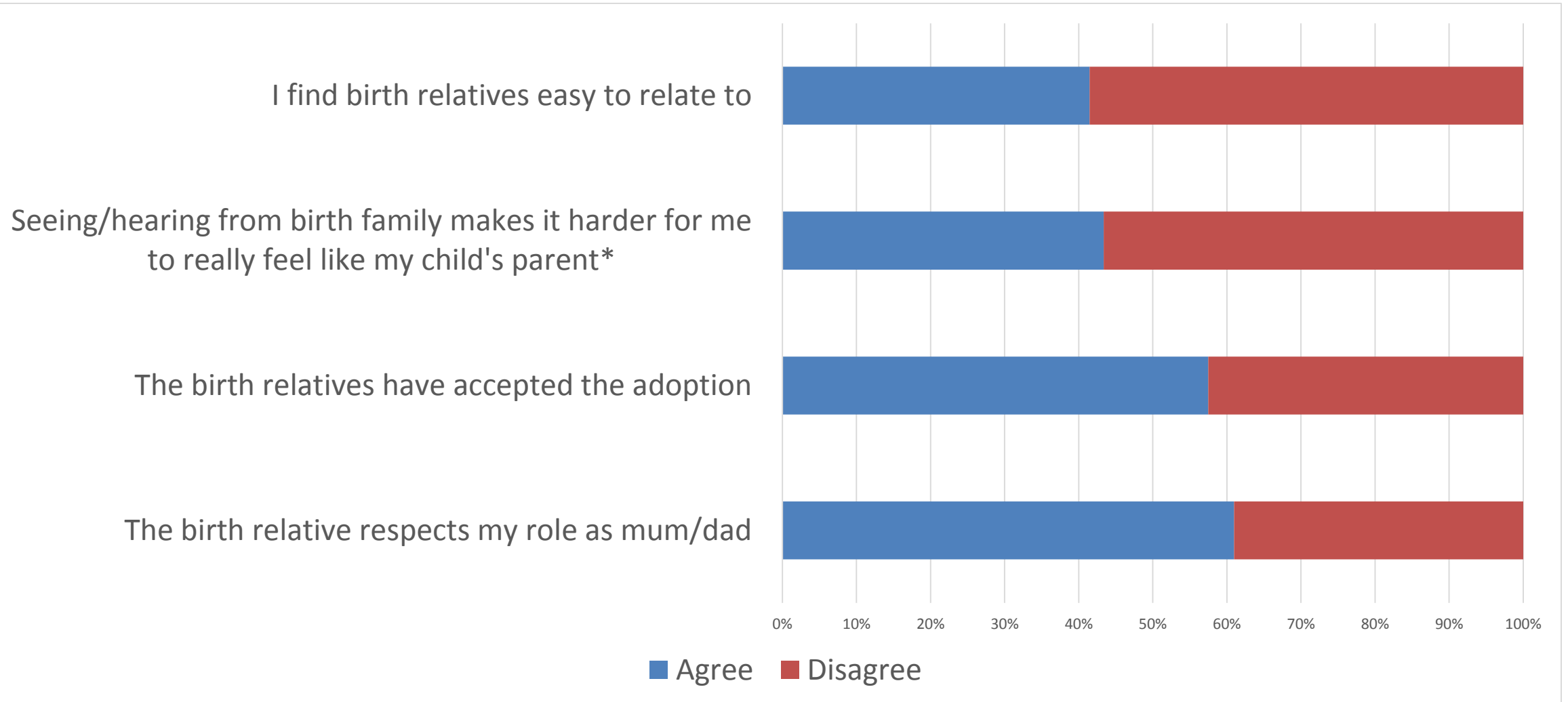


Complex contact arrangements

“my two children, who are siblings, and then their other two older siblings and then birth mum and dad as well as post adoption worker , myself, another adoptive father and a foster mum all have to arrange a suitable date and venue! This is very hard...”



Managing relationships



Managing relationships



- ▶ *“Trying to make conversation with people I didn't know and had very little in common with.”*
- ▶ *“Birth parent was happy to just watch our child rather than initiate play, despite our best efforts.”*
- ▶ *“Generally the children are happy to check birth parents... are ok and happy to leave again .”*



Sibling placed apart



- ▶ *“Siblings are reassured when they see each other. It allows them to bond and maintain relationships which they can continue into adulthood.”*
- ▶ *“Aware of a massive difference in their lives.”*
- ▶ *“This is who my child looks up to and he is now misbehaving“*



Siblings adopted together

- ▶ *"Our children have the same birth mother but different birth fathers and they have both had two very different experiences of birth mother. Our son was more or less rejected from when he was born, but our daughter was put on a pedestal and very much given anything she wanted...At the very first contact... it was horrendous and the birth mother was all over our daughter and the son he just... said he never wanted to see her again."*

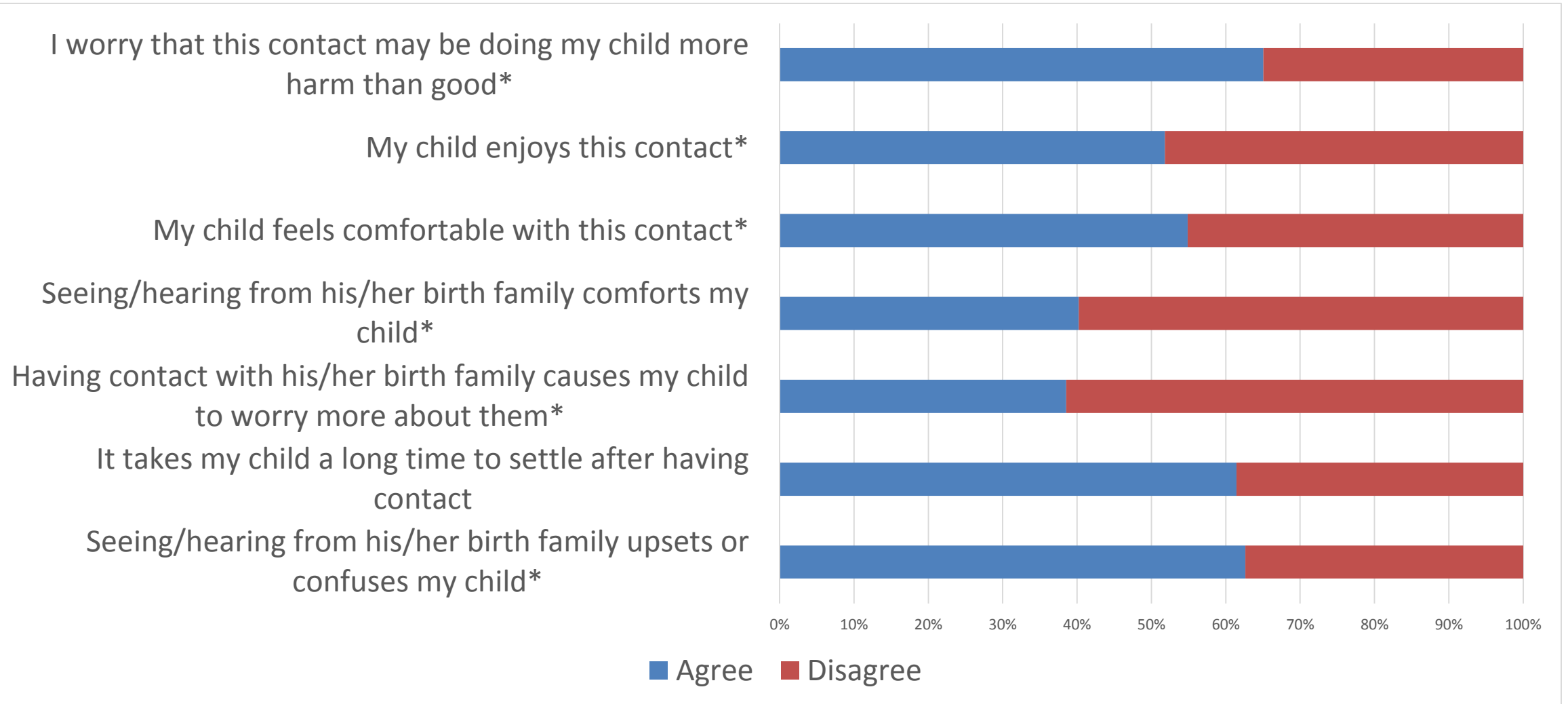


Negotiating social media

- ▶ *“Our children are all over the internet (with a statement saying) they have been forced into adoption“.*
- ▶ *“this led to my son being recognised by friends in our neighbourhood who put two and two together and now realise who his birth mum is which was his private business.“*
- ▶ *“it’s the child’s right whether her photographs should be online or not and it’s nearly a violation of her rights”*



The emotional impact of contact on children



Need for trauma-informed services

- ▶ *"Our daughter gets so very over-excited before it and so very anxious and insecure afterwards, it takes a huge toll on the whole family.,,"*
- ▶ *"My child has been so undermined in his progress in becoming secure and becoming part of our family due to the contact with his birth mother... everytime we bring him to see his birth mother he becomes incredibly confused about who will care for him long term - it has taken four months to regain his trust after the last contact and in this time his whole life has been in turmoil with lots of regression."*



Need to understand children's perspectives



- ▶ *“Birth mum smothers my son in affection... she follows him around telling him she loves him & trying to kiss him constantly, he is so uncomfortable with it but much too nice a child to tell her to stop.”*
- ▶ *"She (child) used to remark when contact was due 'I wish I had a broken leg and didn't have to go'."*



The importance of empathy

- ▶ *“I suppose if you think of it you could assume the majority of people who have had their children placed for adoption are going to have a lot of trauma in their own lives and their ability to regulate their emotions and cope with issues I would imagine going to be a stumbling block for lots of contacts for them.”*
- ▶ *“We feel that (birth mother) needs more support”*

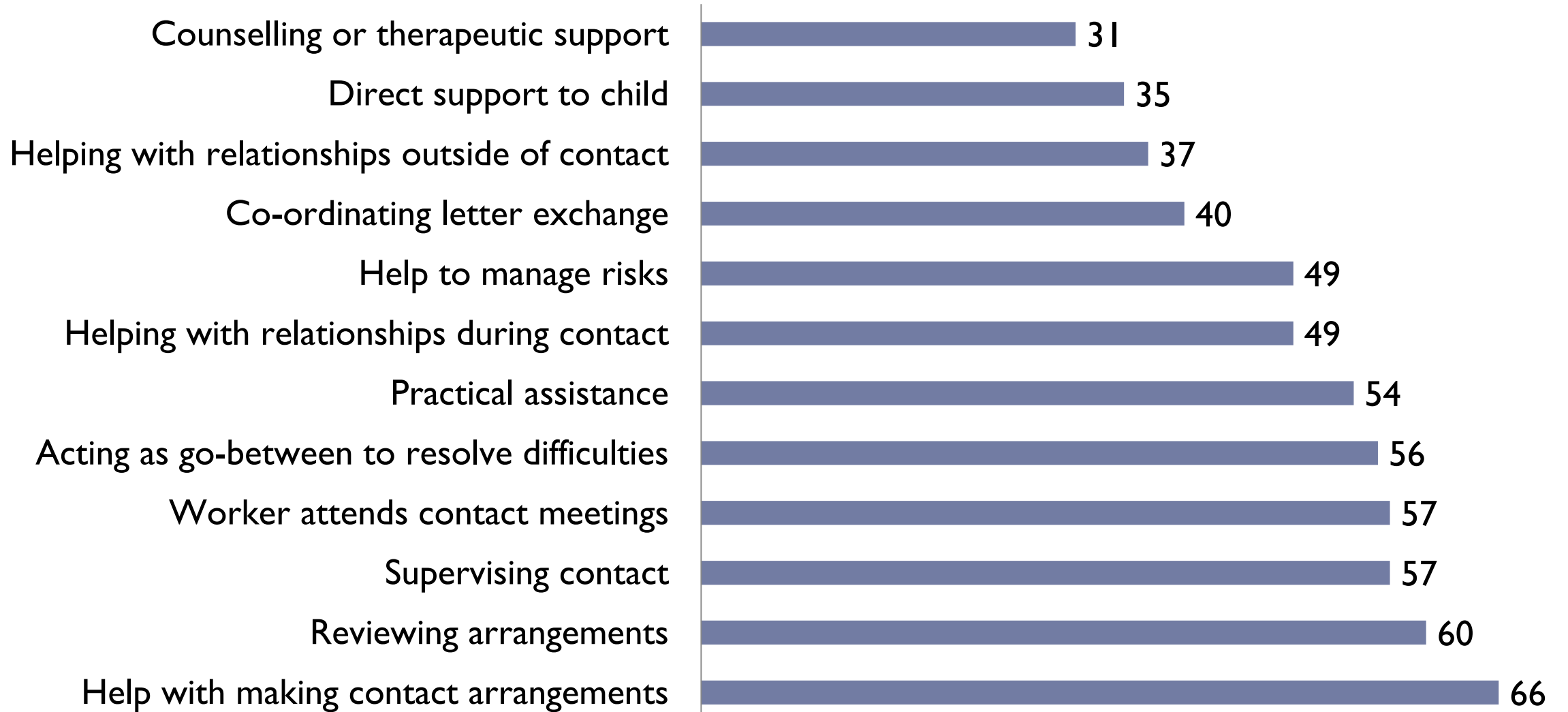


Need for empowering practice

- ▶ *I am unsure whether or not my child benefits from contact at all, but feel pressurised to continue.*
- ▶ *We always maintained that our child was upset by contact but were told that the birth mother could go to court and insist on having contact. We were advised that contact was highly recommended and would be best for our child.*
- ▶ *Don't force it on families. Social workers get to go home after contact, we get to take a disturbed child home and deal with their nightmares.....but the SW gets a good night sleep!!*
- ▶ *need for social workers to be empathic, respectful and 'a strong presence' during contact*



Support for contact

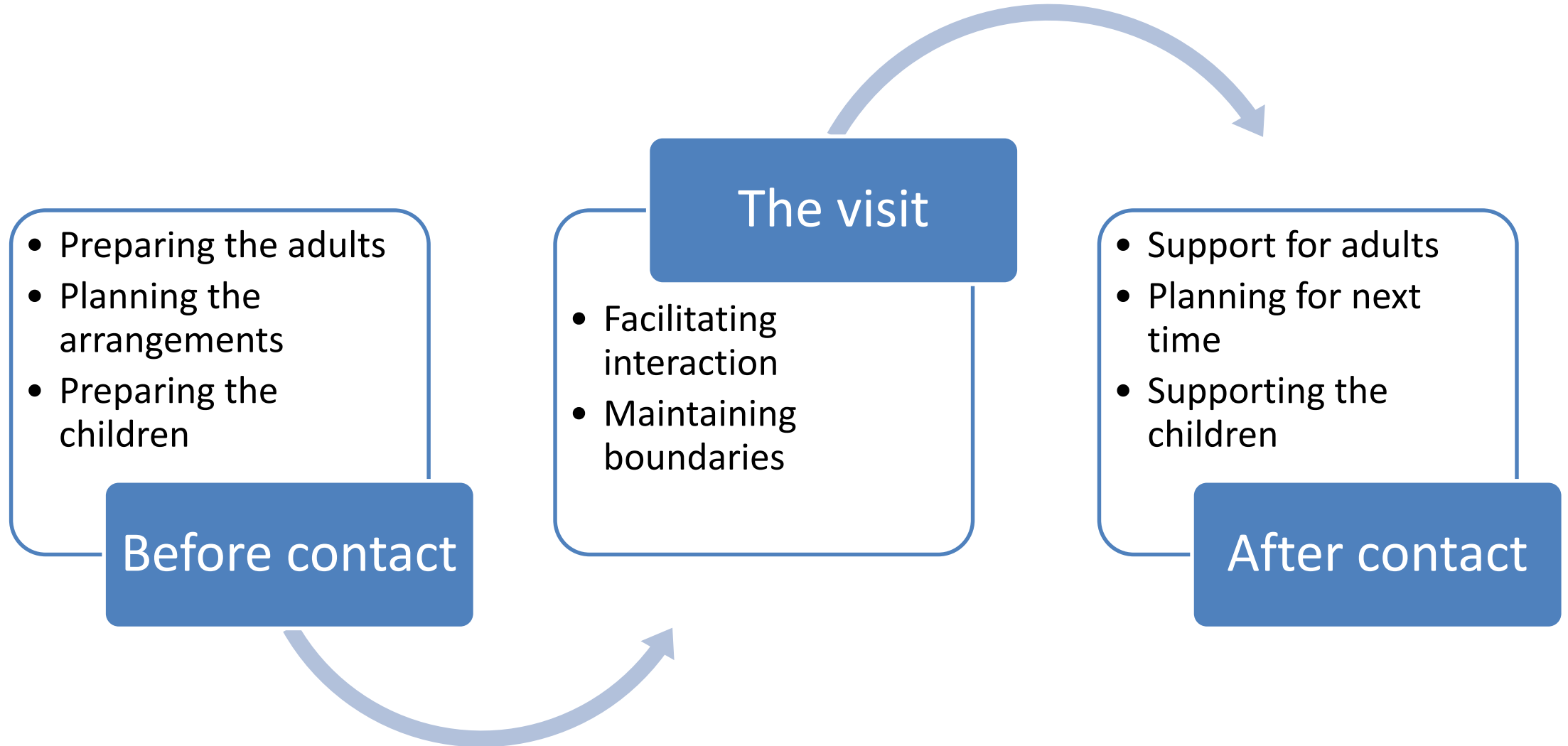


Adopters' suggestions for family-focused support

- ▶ Ongoing support for birth parents after adoption
- ▶ Help everyone prepare for contact
- ▶ Establish clear rules for visits
- ▶ Be a 'strong presence' during visits
- ▶ Debrief after contact
 - ▶ *"You just sometimes think I wish I could talk to somebody about how it makes me feel."*
- ▶ Provide counselling or therapeutic support for children



Suggestions for family-focused practice



Difficult meetings

- ▶ *“Contact with birth Mum has been awful as she has never accepted the adoption and does not think about my son's perspective at all. She does not stick to agreements about bringing presents etc. She has posted pictures taken at contact on Facebook which was specifically not allowed. At the last contact birth mum hardly spoke to me or my son... She has told her remaining children that I am my son's granny and am looking after him and that he will someday come back...”*



Beneficial meetings

- ▶ *Alternatively, contact with birth Dad is generally positive and has been beneficial to my son. They get on well - with birth Dad showing a keen interest in his welfare and giving me my place as his Mum, also showing much appreciation.”*
- ▶ *“We have an hour’s contact twice a year, always over holiday times which means it’s quite easy to organise... We take our mobile phone with us and are able to show photos, which is a good way to have a catch up. We find after about three quarters of an hour his mother is happy to finish up contact and seems settled that she has had a catch up... Sometimes he can be a bit unsettled after it but this has settled down as he gets older”*




Young people's views

they (adoptive parents)
don't seem to have any
problem with her so
...why should I have any
problems about it- it's
just normal

it helps me know
where I came
from – it just
makes it easier

I would get upset after
seeing her....because she
was on her own and I was
worrying about her

the positives of
contact?.....Just knowing
that she is ok



In conclusion...

- ▶ *"Hypothetically, it is a good thing, I think in practical terms it is very, very complicated."*
- ▶ *"We view it as necessary and important; but not always easy."*
- ▶ Takes effort to make work
- ▶ Need for realistic expectations of contact
- ▶ Need to consider multiple and complex plans
- ▶ Need for systemic services that scaffold relationships
- ▶ Need better understanding of children's needs, experiences, emotions



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