

PRACTICE GUIDE

Family contact for children in care

Family contact can generally be described as a child or young person's time spent with people that have a significant connection to them. Family contact can also be referred to as parental contact, visitation or family connection time.

What is family contact

What is meant by family contact differs for each child in care. Family contact is unique for each child and young person and is determined by the range of relationships the child and young person has and their culture and their current circumstance. Family contact may include the child and young person's contact with:

- siblings
- parents
- extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins (remember extended family can be related by blood, marriage or culture)
- persons of cultural or ethnic significance, such as community Elders
- other persons of significance in the child's life, such as a long standing family friend.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle

For an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child apply the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (CPP) to your assessment and planning of family contact arrangements. In particular the applying the CPP element of *Connection* guides our practice in maintaining connections to family, community, culture and country.

Think about how family contact can support a child or young person increase their connection. For example:

- The location of the contact could occur on their country, contact in a Child Safety Service Centre (CSSC) may be distressing for a family member.
- Parents' may be encouraged to use their language or dialect.
- Family contact could occur for cultural celebrations.
- In the event of sorry business, consult the family about any changes they wish to make for contact, including in what ceremonies they wish for the child or young person to participate.
- Support a child, young person or family's wishes and rights to include an Independent Person in decision making

Refer to the Safe Care and Connection Practice kit for further information.

Types of contact

There are many different ways children and young people can have direct or indirect contact with family members in, such as:

- Face-to-face contact
- Telephone calls
- SMS or Text messages
- Emails, written letters or notes
- Video conferencing technology, such as Facetime, Skype
- Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook

For many children and young people, they will communicate and connect with their family members using many of these mediums. For example a child may visit with their parents and siblings on the weekend, have telephone contact during the week and write emails to their grandparents living interstate and talk to them using Facetime. Be creative and tailor the contact plans to suit the child and family and include a wide range of kin.

Why is family contact important?

The *Child Protection Act (1999)* Section 5B (k) states that a child should be able to maintain relationships with their parents and kin if it is appropriate. Section 87 and 88 requires that children and young people are provided with opportunities to have contact with their parents' and members of their extended family, community or their language group. The Act refers to any child placed in care and does not differ between the type of child protection order.

Research suggests that well-planned and positive family contact benefits children and young people in the following ways:

- Regular parental contact is positively associated with family reunification and reduces the amount of time a child spends in care.
- Maintaining/building attachment and connection with family and other significant people supports a child and young person's emotional need for love, a sense of belonging, stability and continuity, and relational permanency whether or not reunification is possible.
- There is an established connection between parental contact and child well-being, self-esteem and positive identity development.
- Contact that enables parents to continue their relationship with their child, as well as provide opportunities to parent is a significant predictor of safe and lasting reunification.
- Continuity of relationships and routine helps children and young people to cope with instability in other areas of their life.

In addition, family contact can help with:

- giving parents opportunities to demonstrate 'acts of protection'
- assessment of parent-child interactions and relationships,
- assessment of parenting skills and capacity;
- providing support, intervention, education, modelling and practice of specific safety strategies and parenting skills

Consider "what is the purpose of family contact for this individual child or young person?"

Lessons from research



Family contact practice principles

Child Safety staff have a critical role in making contact happen. When we meet with families, carers, children and young people to discuss family contact consider the following principles to guide the decision making.

Family contact supports relational permanency

Relational permanency is enhanced through regular safe contact with parents siblings and extended family members. Family contact is about relationships and identity, and is not determined on a parents' ability or inability to achieve case plan tasks. It is a separate assessment, using the Safe contact tool, to create safe and supported connection between children and their family.

Family contact is about the best interests of the child

Arrangements for family contact are child-centred and focus on the needs of the individual child. The needs or wishes of parents, other family members and carers around family contact are also considered.

The specific purposes of contact for a child will change over time, dependent upon safety considerations, the child's emotional and developmental needs, their wishes and the circumstances of their family and carers. Ensure that updated information about the child is shared with the child's parents so they can learn and develop new skills in line with these changes.

Where the needs of adults are in conflict with the child's best interests then decision-making must favour the child's needs and interests, both in the short and long-term.

Marty Beyer (2008) developed visit coaching which is a practice shift from supervised contact. Instead of supervising or monitoring contact the 'coach's' role is to support, empower and offer guidance to the family member. This approach demonstrates or mentors positive parenting practices and encourages acts of protection.

Visiting coaching involves helping parents to understanding their child's specific needs and how they can meet these needs, empowering parents by identifying their strengths when they respond to the child, and helping the parent to understand their emotions and managing them appropriately in front of the children.

Further information can be found <https://www.martybeyer.com/content/visit-coaching>

The physical and emotional safety of the child is a priority

Focus on physical and emotional safety for the child when making arrangements for family contact. In particular, a child's need for safety influences decisions about:

- who the child has contact with
- what type of contact occurs
- whether contact is supervised or unsupervised and to what extent
- where contact is held
- the duration of contact, the time of day, and the type of activities.

A balanced and rigorous assessment of any risks to the child's safety from family contact is informed by:

- listening to what the child or young person says about how they feel about contact with particular people, revisiting this over time, and observing behaviours and actions may communicate to how they are feeling
- seeking the views and opinions of those people close to the child or young person, for example family members, carers, friends and other professionals such as teachers and therapists
- asking people who have observed the child or young person's behaviour and interactions with their family members, for example carers or other professionals
- liaising with carers about a child's behaviour before, during and after any type of family contact (remembering it is understandable for children to be upset after contact finishes so this behaviour should be understood in context)
- liaising with people who have transported or supervised the child's contact
- reviewing file material for relevant history

Family contact may occur in any setting where it is safe to do so and is supportive of meaningful family connection. Holding contact in a CSSC is unnatural, and not a positive environment to build connection or to allow for parents to demonstrate their best parenting. Only use the CSSC when there are significant safety concerns and no other safe locations can be found.

Use the safe contact tool to determine the safest location of contact for the family.

When children are placed with kinship carers, consider if there are any existing opportunities that may continue where children and family can attend together such as family night dinner. Kinship carers may be the most appropriate person to supervise/support family contact by creating a true sense of family connection.

Where a child or young person is adamant that they feel unsafe and cannot or will not explain why, or where they display extreme distress and refuse to participate in contact arrangements, then contact should cease (at least temporarily) while the CSO thoroughly assesses the situation. In a situation where visits are stopped, a child or young person may feel comfortable with more indirect forms of contact while visits are 'on hold'.

Planning and decision-making occurs in collaboration with the child, family and their safety and support network

Research suggests that where the parties involved in family contact have been actively involved in planning and decision-making, and feel that their views and opinions have been listened to, then contact plans are more likely to work (Neil and Howe 2004). While it is seldom possible to make plans that fit perfectly with the needs of all parties involved in contact, the experience of having views and wishes actively sought and listened to can build good will and allow for more positive problem solving processes.

Seek the views and wishes of children and young people in a developmentally appropriate way. A child or young persons' view regarding family contact may also be obtained through the use of the tools such as The three houses, The future house, and Circles of safety and support.

Contact plans are documented and regularly reviewed

Decisions and arrangements about family contact must be regularly reviewed to ensure that the child or young person's needs remain the focus and are being met. Documenting family contact agreements makes it more likely that contact will occur, reduces opportunities for confusion and where any difficulties emerge, having a documented record may help with resolution.

Where contact changes or ceases (the chief executive refuses to allow, restricts or imposes conditions on family contact), the *Child Protection Act 1999*, section 87(3) requires departmental officers to give written notice to each person affected by the decision. This means if you are imposing any type of condition such as supervision of contact, fortnightly contact or only written communication, these are all forms of restricting and/or imposing conditions requiring a reviewable decision letter. Unless the parent/family member is able to see the child whenever and wherever they like with no restrictions whatsoever, all family contact arrangements will have a reviewable decision letter. Be sure to send a written letter at each review and/or change of the contact and ensure all parties affected receives a letter i.e. parents and the child (if appropriate).

Safe contact tool

To help you assess the appropriate level and nature of family contact, consider using the Safe contact tool (see CSPM tools) which has been developed to support collaborative, transparent and safety-centred decision making about family contact. It is designed to engage all the significant people in the child or young persons' life, including the child themselves if they are old enough, in ongoing conversations about safe levels of contact.

The tool involves everyone in thinking through:

- what needs to happen for safe contact to be established
- whether that contact needs to be supervised or unsupervised
- what would need to be in place or be demonstrated by the parents/family for contact to be increase in the future, including moving from supervised to unsupervised if this is relevant

This tool assists you to work through the worries and strengths of family contact to develop arrangements for safe and meaningful contact between the children, parents and extended family members. This assessment can then be included in your reviewable decision letter to the parents and extended family members (and where applicable the child) advising them of the decision made in collaboration with the family. The Safe contact tool can also to be used to review and assess changes of family contact.

Intersectionality of domestic and family violence with family contact

Communication and assessment is vital when assessing family contact arrangements when there domestic and family violence has been identified between a child's parents. Remember the child's safety and wellbeing is priority.

Complete the Safe contact tool with the non-offending parent to ensure that contact decisions do not put the child or non-offending parent at increased risk of harm. Understanding the type of power and control that is being used will provide valuable information to complete this assessment.

Where domestic and family violence is identified, it may continue and escalate after a child is placed in care. In such circumstances, there is a greater likelihood that the child may be harmed during family contact. Family contact may be used by the perpetrating parent to further harm the child and as a means to continue the abuse of the victim parent or extended family members.

Example:

A father may attend contact and attend to the child’s needs during contact however speak negatively about their mother therefore impacting the child’s feelings of safety when with their mother.

Refer to the DFV practice kit and Safe and Together perpetrator mapping assessments for information about the pattern of perpetrator behaviour in order to inform safe contact planning.

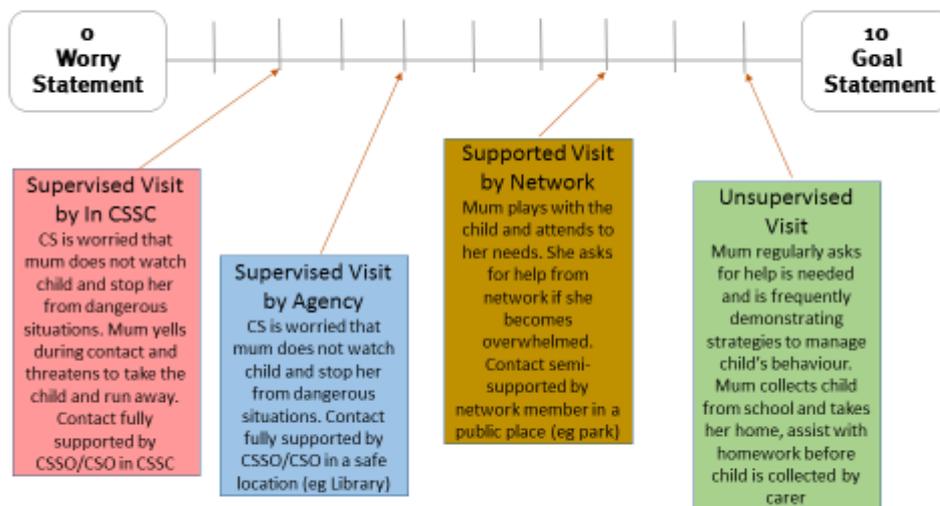
Family contact between the parent choosing to use violence and the child may not be in the child’s best interests, where family contact is likely to be used to:

- harass, abuse and denigrate the victim parent
- make comments and/or threats to the victim parent through coercion of the child to deliver the message
- use coercive and manipulative behaviour to threaten, intimidate and control the victim parent and/or child
- disrupt agreed contact arrangements for face-to-face visits, telephone contact, emails.

Supervision of family contact

Family contact at its best is unsupervised, in a natural location and provides meaningful connection between children and their family. Supervision involves someone who has been assessed as a safe person, being present during the contact between a child and their family member. This person is usually described by the Children’s Court as a ‘departmentally approved person’. This may include a child safety staff member, agency worker, or a member of the child’s safety and support network. The role of the supervisor is to ensure everyone’s safety during the visit while encouraging and supporting the family member to increase their skills and address any worries identified in the Safe contact tool which were raised as the safety reasons to restrict and supervise the contact.

Supervision arrangements are to be reviewed regularly and adjusted as the safety issues are addressed. If we put the worries and goals of contact on a scale it can help a child or young person’s family and network understand what safe contact looks like, and how we can take steps to move towards unsupervised contact. See below an example of how contact may look over time as a parent builds their network and demonstrates acts of protection.



A child placed with parental consent (such as Child Protection Care Agreement) has similar needs for belonging, security and relationship, to those placed under child protection orders. While the consensual nature of the placement means that contact is legally free from any restrictions, it is valuable for parents and carers to be engaged with contact planning. This work is critical where the placement is a safety strategy, placements are extended for a period of time or where they lead to applications for an order with custody provisions.

The participation of carers in family contact

There are many ways carers can partner with parents to co-parent children while they are in care and support ongoing family contact arrangements. Some ways carers can partner with parents are outlined below, adapted from the 'Bridging the Gap' resource developed by Denise Goodman (Goodman cited DCCSDS 2015).

| No direct relationship between carers and the child's family | When a relationship is commencing between carers and the child's family | Carers actively partnering with parents to co-parent |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send pictures of child to parent; ask for pictures of parent • Send snack or activity for visit • Remember the child's family in traditions such as birthday celebrations • Request cultural information from family • Share child's Lifebook • Share copies of school report cards and awards • Share child's artwork and craft with family • Exchange letters with child's family • Speak positively and openly about the child's family • Learn about the child's family, community and culture • Take photos of special occasions and give to parent • Nurture the child after family contact to help their grief and loss | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take child to contact and talk positively about the contact • Talk with parents about child's day to day life • Encourage parent to phone child and child to phone parent • Support phone calls to parents to celebrate momentous occasions (eg scored a goal at soccer) • Meet child's parents and family • Ask for the parent's advice regarding their child • Attend meetings and reviews when the parent is present i.e. Safety and Support Network • Reassure parent of child's love • Attend training to learn ways to work with the birth parent • Refer to child as 'your child' when speaking with the parents • Share parenting information the parents | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome parents into the carers home • Carer attends the parents' home • Family contact to occur across both homes • Support child's transition back to their family • Involve child's family in visits to doctors, counsellors and school • Assist in planning child's reunification to their family and support the family's reunification efforts • Assist parents with transportation • Coordinate and discuss discipline together • Advocate for services for family and provide assistance in obtaining services • Support and encourage family's involvement in family therapy • Provide feedback to parents on family contact visits • Model and teach parenting skills in your home • Provide informal respite care for parents when children return home • Serve as support to family after child returns home |

Barriers to positive family contact.

Unfortunately, family contact arrangements are sometimes not positive for a child or family member. Despite all good intentions, the limits of resources or time to appropriately consider contact means that errors in planning occur which can lead a contact to fail. Some common areas that making positive contact difficult include:

- children having to travel long distances to and from contact means they might be tired or bored during their family contact time
- contact arranged during a child's normal nap time
- parents having to manage numerous appointments as well as ensure they attend contact on time
- contacts occurring in areas where there are no suitable resources for a child's age group eg inappropriate toys, nothing to occupy the child;
- heavily supervising contacts and writing notes may make parents scared to parent their child in fear of doing something else wrong

Being mindful of issues such as these, and speaking with the network to develop work arounds where possible will ensure contact can be as meaningful and safe as possible.

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Version history

Last reviewed: September 2019