



# One minute guide

## Contact / Family Time

No. 144, February 2021

### What is Contact / Family Time?

Contact / family time provides opportunities for looked after children and young people to stay in touch with their family, friends and other people who are important to them. Sometimes it is called just 'contact'.

The local authority has a duty under the [Children Act 1989](#) to promote contact and Courts are required to consider the issues of contact before they make an order, such as a [Care Order](#). Children and young people who are looked after should be encouraged and supported to maintain contact with their parents, anyone with parental responsibility, brothers and sisters and other significant family and network members – where it is safe to do so and as set out in their care plan.

Contact / family time can be either direct or indirect. It is important that when using the terms direct and indirect contact you are clear about what this means. Direct contact is where the child spends time face to face with their family. Indirect contact includes phone calls, Skype or FaceTime (etc.), letters, birthday cards and Christmas cards.

Contact / family time can be unsupervised, facilitated or supervised as explained below.

### What is unsupervised, facilitated and supervised contact?

As part of the assessment and planning process for contact the social worker needs to consider if it should be unsupervised, facilitated or supervised:

**Unsupervised contact** means that the contact takes place with no-one else there who has a specific role to facilitate, support or supervise the contact.

**Facilitated contact** is where some support is provided for the contact such as a room in a Contact Centre or a Children's Centre; and where possible, staff might greet everyone beforehand and pop in to ask if anything is needed. This would need to have been agreed with the setting prior to arranging the booking of the room.

**Supervised contact** involves someone who is allocated to be present throughout the whole session and a written record is kept. This sometimes happens because information about the parent(s) in contact sessions is needed to inform court proceedings. Another reason for supervising contact is for the child's safety and welfare.

### What do children and young people want to call contact / family time?

Children Looked after and care leavers in Leeds have told us they have differing views about the language that should be used to describe contact, depending on their wishes and feelings. They thought that the options 'Contact', 'Family Time', 'Contact with family' and 'Family time with birth family' could all be used. They also thought that what was most important was that the child or young person was asked what term they would prefer to be used, as every child and young person's situation is different and that normal language such as 'spending time with' should be used rather than describing a process.

## What are our contact / family time principles?

We have worked with looked after children and young people in Leeds to identify a set of principles to inform our practice when assessing, planning, arranging and reviewing contact / family time arrangements. Here is a summary of what they said:

Contact should take place, unless it is not reasonably practicable or consistent with the child's welfare;

Where contact with significant people in the child's life has been lost, we should consider how this can be re-established;

Where children have moved on from care givers (e.g. foster carers), contact should be maintained unless it is not in the child's interests;

Contact must always be for the benefit of the child and not the parent/relative or friend;

Contact should only be supervised where it is necessary to ensure children are safeguarded and their welfare promoted. Where contact needs to be supervised then this is better if it can be undertaken by someone familiar to the child;

Care givers such as foster carers or staff in children's homes should play an active role in planning, arranging and supporting contact / family time;

Transport arrangements should allow plenty of time for the child to arrive on time and have the full arranged time with their family or network;

Contact should take place in venues that are appropriate for children and young people, taking into account their ages and who they are meeting up with. It should be fun and enjoyable for children and young people but not necessarily costly;

Assessment and planning for contact should take into consideration the ethnicity, culture and language needs of children and their families;

Children and young people have a choice about who they wish to see and have the right to change their minds about this over time;

Every effort must be made to support the maintenance of contact / family time between sisters and brothers;

Having contact with family members is consistent with our restorative principles and contact should be undertaken in line with this approach;

The Family Group Conference as a decision making forum can be helpful in agreeing a plan for supporting contact;

Contact should not be seen as a reward or punishment to be given or withheld. It is a child's right to have contact, unless this is not in their best interest; and

Contact should be reviewed regularly to ensure that this continues to meet the needs of the child or young person.

## For more information

You can read more in the Children's Social Work Service online procedures chapter on [Contact / Family Time](#).