

GUIDANCE FOR FOSTER CARERS ON PROMOTING CONTACT

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Contact between looked after children and their families of origin and others who have played an important part in their lives is of considerable importance.

Although this may not affect you if a child or young person placed with you does not have any appropriate people to maintain contact with, it is always promoted where possible, and so it is important that you are aware of your responsibilities as a carer.

Foster carers have an important and central role in promoting successful contact. It is important that foster carers have a clear understanding from the outset of the placement about contact arrangements that may be in place.

This document provides advice and guidance to carers about the importance of enabling contact safely. Do not worry if you do not fully understand it at present, your supervising social worker will give you step-by-step guidance and close supervision if you need to help maintain contact for a child or young person you are caring for.

1.2 Why Promote Contact?

Research has evidenced that most children in care will eventually resume contact with their families. The success of this will depend on whether or not there has been any contact with them over the years, but more importantly whether this contact was managed in a positive way.

Research has also shown that it is vitally important for children and parents to have contact soon after placement. If this pattern of visits is not set early on, it may take the return of the child/young person to their family more difficult later (if this is the plan for the placed child/young person).

Please bear in mind that contact, however occasional, will continue to have value for a child even when there is no question of returning to his or her family. These contacts can keep alive a child's sense of his or her origins and will keep open options for family relationships in later life.

It is therefore essential that the important role that contact plays is understood by everyone involved in the welfare of the child/young person.

1.3 What will basically be expected of me?

You will be expected to maintain a flexible and positive attitude to contact with the birth family and significant others for the child or young person you are caring for.

Flexibility may be required during the placement in line with developments for the child's future. You may be asked to manage several contact sessions a week, so it is important to be clear from the outset of any placement how much contact will be required and whether you can realistically manage this. Any changes to contact will be confirmed by the social worker. Contact sessions may be held at your home or a contact centre organized by the Local Authority.

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Positive, continued contact can help the looked after child settle in placement, especially if it is respected and promoted during their foster care experience. Contact will therefore also be of assistance to you in offering a stable placement.

Foster carers should convey any worries or concerns about contact arrangements to their supervising social worker and/or the child's social worker as appropriate.

2 Promoting Contact: Practical Information and Procedural Guidance

2.1 Matching

The need for and benefits of appropriate contact for the child will be considered for every child referred to Foster Care Link prior to matching with a carer.

2.2 Children Placed out of Area

Where it is proposed to place the child with a carer away from the child's home area, arrangements will be agreed in advance as to how contact will be supported. The views and circumstances of the following will be taken into account wherever appropriate:

- the child
- the child's parent(s)
- the proposed carer(s)
- others considered by the placing authority to be relevant

2.3 Recording and Reviewing Arrangements for Contact

Immediate contact arrangements should be agreed and put in writing at a placement planning meeting or may already be included in the child's Care Plan. Sometimes the contact arrangements will have been determined by a Court, as part of Care Proceedings.

The effectiveness of the contact plan and the need for revision will be considered at every statutory childcare review. Where there is a need to vary agreed contact in an emergency, this will need to be agreed by the child's social worker, duty worker or emergency out of hour's worker.

2.4 Risk Assessments

The child's social worker should carry out a risk assessment before contact takes place.

The child's social worker and the supervising social worker should ensure that arrangements are in place for any required supervision of contact before contact takes place.

Children's social workers will need to take into account the rights of anyone with parental responsibility to remove at any time a child accommodated under Section 20 Children Act 1989.

2.5 Restriction of Contact

2.5.1 Accommodated Children

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Neither the placing authority nor the carer can restrict the right of anyone with parental responsibility for contact with the child where the child is accommodated under Section 20 Children Act 1989.

In theory this contact could be on demand at any time. In practice, the level of contact should be agreed with holders of parental responsibility and recorded in the Placement Planning Meeting minutes or the Child's Care Plan.

Where a birth parent or other holder of parental responsibility fails to keep to agreed arrangements for contact or is acting unreasonably, such as phoning the child several times a day or arriving at the carer's house late at night, the child's social worker must be consulted.

Consideration must then be given to what action needs to be taken which may include any of the following:

- calling an early childcare review to reconsider the contact plan
- ending the placement
- seeking an Emergency Protection Order or initiating care proceedings if the child is suffering or at risk of suffering significant harm

2.5.2 Children in Care

The Court will have considered the proposed contact arrangements before making a Care Order and may well have given directions in respect of contact. The contact arrangements agreed in Court or as directed should therefore normally be reflected in the Care Plan.

The placing authority or the child may request an order under Section 34 (4) of the Children Act 1989 which allows the placing authority to refuse contact. Such orders can be made at the time of the care proceedings or at a later date.

The placing authority may refuse to allow contact in an emergency if:

- they are satisfied that it is necessary to do so to safeguard and promote the child's welfare and
- the refusal is urgent and does not last more than seven days

2.6 Supervision of Contact

Carers are expected to be available to supervise contact, where this has been agreed at the placement planning meeting.

In some cases contact will take place at a contact centre and be supervised by a contact worker. The foster carers role maybe limited to transporting the child to and from the contact centre.

2.7 Recording Contact Outcomes

Supervising social workers should ensure that all carers record the outcome of contact arrangements in accordance with Foster Care Link's Recording Policy and Guidance for Carers and that this information is fed back to the child's social worker.

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Whether or not you directly supervise contact, you should record the child's reaction before, during and after contact. There may be occasions when a parent or relative does not turn up for contact, but it is still important to record the child's reaction to this. Recording should be done as soon as possible after contact.

Where the child is subject to Care Proceedings, it is likely that the child's social worker will need to inform the Court about contact and so they will require detailed, accurate notes.