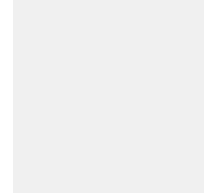


Contact Guidance



SCOPE OF THIS CHAPTER

The aim of this guidance is to ensure that each child in foster care or living apart from their birth family is encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships and these arrangements are set out clearly in their **Care Plan** and/or Foster Placement Agreement.

Contents

1. [Statutory Framework](#)
2. [Supporting Children's Contact with Parents and Families](#)
3. [Practice Points](#)
4. [Organising Contact for Older Children and Young People](#)
5. [Questions to be Considered when Making Decisions About Newborn Baby and Infant Contact](#)
6. [Suggested Duration and Frequency of Contact for Newborns and Infants](#)
7. [Checklist of Good Practice for Arranging Infant Contact](#)
8. [Suggested Reading List](#)

1. Statutory Framework

Walsall Council has a duty to promote contact for all **Children in Need** and **Looked after Children** with their families. The law (Children Act 1989) says that Local Authorities must "promote contact between a child who is not looked after but is living away from home and his/her family where it is necessary to do so in order to safeguard and promote his/her welfare". It also says that Local Authorities should "endeavour to promote contact between a looked after child and his/her family unless it is not practicable or consistent with the child's welfare".

Regulation 14 of the Fostering Services Regulations places a duty on fostering service providers to promote contact between a child placed with a foster parent and his/her parents, relatives and friends unless such contact is not reasonable practicable or consistent with the child's welfare, subject to the provisions of the foster placement agreement and any court order relating to contact.

Standards 10.1 to 10.9 of the [National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services](#) state how fostering service providers are expected to achieve this. (Regulations can be downloaded from [Gov.uk](#)).

The term contact refers to all links between a child and their family of origin and friends, regardless of the form and frequency of these links. It may include overnight stays, telephone calls, exchange of letters or photographs or indirect links through third parties. These will range from frequent face to face contact to occasional exchanges of information. The majority of children's interests will best be served by efforts to sustain or create links with their birth families. Face to face meetings will generally be the most common and satisfactory way of maintaining such relationships.

Even when there is no obvious contact, social workers and carers need to address the need to keep a child connected with their family background and to help them develop a sense of identity.

Research shows that the earliest weeks of a looked after episode are crucial to the success of a placement, the relationship between the parents, carers and social workers, the level of future contact and the prognosis for an early return home. It is important therefore to ensure that contact arrangements are in place before or at the point a child moves to a foster placement and that arrangements for contact are recorded on the Placement Agreement.

When considering contact arrangements, social workers should take into account the need to sustain links with all those in the child's network and not just their immediate family. This may include friends, neighbours, schools and out of school clubs and activities.

2. Supporting Children's Contact with Parents and Families

Contact with their immediate family is generally a positive experience for children who are not living with their parents, helping them to maintain a sense of belonging and identity. Contact arrangements should be focused on the needs of the child, should be safe and should be agreed and understood by all involved. Most children living with members of their extended families will be in contact with one or both of their parents, any brothers and sisters, and often with other relatives. This will usually, although there can be exceptions, help to promote positive relationships.

We usually refer to contact as either direct contact or indirect contact:

DIRECT CONTACT means meetings between the child/young person and birth family members and/or significant others, and includes phone calls, texting and emails.

INDIRECT CONTACT means letters and cards from members of the birth family and /or significant others, usually through a third person.

- Contact is a key issue for children and they often have ambivalent feelings, both wanting it but feeling distressed at the same time. They often desire more contact with fathers and

other family members, such as grandmothers and siblings, as well as with mothers, even if they are happy in their placement and do not want to return home;

- Parents also have these ambivalent feelings. Many desperately miss their children, want to have contact and find the experience distressing;
- Developments such as increased placement stability, open communication and improved relationships are often the result of additional interventions, not just contact between birth families and their children alone. However, contact may achieve specific and perhaps more limited and realistic goals, such as reassuring children about what is happening at home;
- Current practice assumes a strong principle, supported by legislation, that contact is generally beneficial and should be promoted, unless it is not in the child's best interests. Decisions need to be made on the different aspects of contact, for example contact with family members. Contact must always be 'fine tuned', assessing and taking into account any risks;
- If the child has been abused, contact can allow abuse to continue if there is unsupervised direct contact or ineffective scrutiny of letters and cards. For children subject to an **Interim Care Order** or a full Care Order, the local authority may refuse contact for a limited period (up to a maximum of 7 days). An application will need to be made to the court to allow the local authority to refuse contact for more than seven days;
- Foster carers are generally positive about contact but some report problems associated with it. In some cases these are serious problems which include drinking, serious mental health problems and violence from members of the birth family. They also express concern about more common problems such as unreliability and have worries about the impact of contact on the behaviour of the foster child, as well as their own children.

3. Practice Points

From [Social Care Institute for Excellence \(scie\)](#):

- Ask yourself if you have explored all opportunities for contact, either direct or indirect. Remember that children in foster care have a legal right to contact with their birth family and most children want to keep in contact, although they find it distressing at times. Also, remember that contact often helps children's feelings of identity: being valued, respected and appreciated;
- Ask yourself if you have 'fine tuned' contact and consulted with the child about all the different aspects of contact, for example, with different family members. Remember not to treat it as a 'blanket' event and ask yourself if you have considered all the alternatives to direct contact when this is not possible;
- Remember to ask children about the contact they want to have with their brothers and sisters and other relatives, for example grandparents. You can also consider previous carers. Try and make contact arrangements because this can be very important to them;

- Remember that children who have been abused by their family members should be protected from risks posed by contact and that their rights to contact can be overruled in the need to keep them safe. Ask yourself if you and their carers have talked with them about how safe they feel and remember to look out for non-verbal signs that may indicate that the child does not feel safe;
- Remember that children who have been abused should not have unsupervised contact with family members who are involved in, or associated with the abuse. Ask yourself if you should scrutinise letters and cards. There must be a formal decision about every risk;
- Remember that most parents also want to have contact, although they may find it distressing, so make sure you talk with parents about how contact could be made less stressful;
- Research shows that contact by itself does not result in improved outcomes, for example, settled placements and reunification, and you should consider additional interventions to achieve these goals;
- Think about the aims of contact between children and their families and whether they are being achieved. The value of contact may be as much to do with reducing distress, helping to keep in touch and to feel valued and respected, as with achieving other outcomes. What can you do to support parents with managing contact?
- Foster carers' needs are also important when making arrangements, so things needs to be discussed in advance to tackle any problems.

4. Organising Contact for Older Children and Young People

Contact needs to be managed in a more pro active way for older children and adolescents with regular reviews of its purpose. Foster carers can often alert social workers to the difficulties that the young person is experiencing, so regular contact with the carer is essential.

Direct work with parent(s) to improve contact might assist in a re negotiation of the relationship with the child. Positive contact with grandparents and family members can be a source of stability and this could in some cases counteract the negativity of contact with birth parents.

Research indicates that older children and adolescents need more help in understanding and managing their relationships with family members, including siblings. It is important that adolescents in particular are not left to manage contact arrangements on their own. Social workers should avoid giving the responsibility of deciding on length and frequency of contact to the young person; as professionals, you should have knowledge of family dynamics and adverse effects of contact on the child and this should be taken into account when drawing up contact agreements.

In conclusion the same careful planning and a constant reviewing of contact arrangements are needed for this group of young people as it is for infants and newborns, and many of the same principles will apply (see further details below).

5. Questions to be Considered when Making Decisions About Newborn Baby and Infant Contact

- Good quality contact with parents and connected persons is essential as reunification of the child to its parents/family is the primary goal;
- Evidence from research and practice indicates that for most children who are separated from their parents, siblings, or other close relatives, it is in their best interests to have some contact with their family. It is also important that this is a positive experience;
- Contact should be compatible with the child's needs taking into account their age, ethnicity, culture, religion and disability. It should also promote their developmental needs.

In the first two years of a child's life the issue of attachment is significant. Attachment is multilayered. Key to successful attachment is a primary care giver, and this can be a parent, a relative or foster carer. For the infant in the care of the local authority, this will usually be the foster carer who is providing consistent, safe, stable and loving care. The building of a secure attachment to a carer in the early life of an infant enables that attachment to be transferred to parents if reunified or to a family member or adopters. The development of secure positive attachment provides the child with a secure base to explore the world.

This attachment will have a developmental benefit for the child, whatever the outcome in terms of care planning. If the child is well cared for and is allowed to settle and develop in as stress free an environment as possible, then the development of a later attachment with a birth parent will stand a better chance of success. If a baby believes they are loveable and believes in the capacity of adults to care, then they will be able to make secure attachments when moving on from the foster carer.

However, if the baby is stressed, for example by long journeys to contact, and inconsistency of carer during contact, and his/her needs are not met at this crucial stage by a carer who is attuned to his/her needs, it will be more difficult for the baby to make strong and healthy attachments later and this could have a damaging effect on future care plans, including those for reunification.

Good care outside of the family can help to alleviate the trauma an infant may experience when removed from the family home and support the infant to manage the future, be it return to the family home or placement outside of the family.

Parents who are both wishing to care for the child and are in dispute frequently get involved in asking for equal contact. The baby's needs have to be at the forefront of planning. There needs to be sufficient time for the baby to recover in between contact sessions. The need for regular routines to be maintained and a secure attachment to a primary carer to be fostered is central to any decision making.

Rather than infants having separate contact with several family members, amalgamating contact should be considered. Identified important people can attend one of the parent's contacts with the child rather than separate contact being arranged. Sibling contact needs careful consideration.

The contact agreement should be reviewed regularly to ensure it continues to meet the changing needs of the child. Parents' engagement with contact needs to be kept under constant review. Not

turning up to contact or regularly turning up late provides evidence about a parent's commitment. For example if a number of contacts are missed without a parent having medical proof/or other proof of not being able to attend, then this should trigger a meeting with parents to consider revising contact arrangements to ensure the child does not experience unnecessary disruption to its routines.

Following is a list of considerations. This list is not exhaustive as each case will need to be assessed individually:

- The venue for contact. Contact at a foster carer's home would be ideal, however a risk assessment should take place before this is arranged;
- Distance to contact needs to be considered, in particular arrangements for sibling contact that is organised in such a way as to prevent disruption as much as possible to the routine of each child;
- Timing of contact - this would need to fit in with the baby/infant's routine;
- Breast feeding mothers should be offered breast pumps, bottles and a cool bag to enable them to express and freeze milk to supply to the carer for their baby;
- Guidance on practical issues such as parents contacting the Contact service prior to attending, missed sessions and timely reviewing of contact should be included in the Contact agreement;
- During the drawing up of the contact agreement it should be made clear what sessions will be used for assessment. There should also be an expectation that contact staff will advise and assist parents with parenting tasks during contact and monitor their ability to understand and carry out the tasks;
- In addition the Contact agreement should include details of working with parents in contact to explore issues that arise using contact notes and in some cases video clips. How the quality of contact is reviewed and assessed should be made clear to the parent;
- It is important that there is discussion by the social worker with the foster carer regarding the presentation of the baby/child before and after contact. This will provide important information on the child's experiences of contact and will form part of the overall assessment process, as will the social worker's own personal observation of contact.

The **Children's Guardian** should be involved in discussions regarding any changes in contact. Their views based on their personal observations of contact should be sought and recorded. Their views regarding the presentation of the child in placement before and after contact based on their personal observations should also be sought and recorded.

6. Suggested Duration and Frequency of Contact for Newborns and Infants

It is possible to offer some guidance on what might be considered reasonable levels of contact but these should only be the base on to which the assessment for an individual child is applied. The

following are guidelines, not a fixed list of choices, and require critical thought as to the individual child's best interests.

The following guidelines were suggested by Coram (practice notes 1 & 2) Kenrick (2009) and more recently this research was supported in a paper "Contact Arrangements for Children: A Call for Views" which was published in July 2012 by Martin Narey, the Government Advisor on Adoption.

0 -6 months - up to three times a week for a duration of no more than three hours.

6- 24 months - up to three times a week for duration of no more than two hours.

Over 24 months - up to two times a week for duration of no more than two hours. This will be dependent on times at nursery and other activities.

Current practice in care proceedings suggests for babies and small children to have contact three times a week and where there is no plan for rehabilitation once a week.

When setting out recommendations in a court statement and care plan it is important to distinguish between contact for infants and older children, and to present relevant research to illustrate the potential impact on the individual child in order to present a plan which:

- Minimises negative impact on the child;
- Promotes the best interests of the child as the primary concern of the court and the local authority;
- Allows for the benefits of contact to parents and 'others' to be retained.

7. Checklist of Good Practice for Arranging Infant Contact

- A focus on quality not quantity of parental contact is needed. In particular, the disruption to an infant's secure base in their attachment relationship with their foster care needs to be minimised to ensure a sense of safety, support and predictable routine;
- A settling-in time with the foster carers before contact begins is necessary. This is a period of peace and quiet for the child which will allow the baby time to settle and develop positive attachments without diminishing the child/birth parent relationship. This is especially important for babies who are more vulnerable because they have had undergone detoxification because of being born withdrawing from drugs or alcohol;
- Family contact needs to support the infant-parent relationship, family strengthening and family reunification. It is often the case that family members, for example grandparents, attend contact for part of the parent's contact. Agreement on who is to attend needs to be made by the social worker. Extra contact causing disruption to babies should be avoided;
- Contact to the absent parent, usually the father, needs careful planning. If the parents are in dispute then the infant's needs should remain central and the arrangements for contact should not significantly increase in order to meet the individual parent's demands;

- The staff who supervise family contact should be consistent and be able to provide support, to intervene therapeutically with disturbed parent/child attachment relationships and to model parenting skills;
- The infant needs personal support during the parental contact. The ideal person to provide this would be the care giver. If this is not possible then it should be from one or two people who are well known to the infant. The involvement of multiple strangers in contact can be damaging to an infant's development;
- Infant travel needs to be kept to a minimum. Venues as close to the foster carers' home should be explored. By focusing on quality not quantity then longer rather than more frequent visits should be considered;
- Frequency of contact will still need to vary in line with plans for reunification or permanent placement outside the family;
- Length of contact should be determined bearing in mind the infant's developmental needs and how parenting capacity and the infant's needs change over time. Longer visits would allow for a cycle of feeding, sleeping and play, all with support and education for parents being provided;
- Family and child friendly venues should be used. More visits in the parents' home, relatives' homes, parks and gardens should be considered, with appropriate risk assessments carried out where necessary. An in depth understanding of the family is needed, with any previous files being carefully read. It is important to consider the experiences a child may have had in the family home and that of extended family members before arranging contact at home;
- If no risks are identified to the foster carers, it is helpful for them to be available for a short period of time to discuss the infant's routine at the hand over and collection of the baby;
- Consistency of timetabling - sessions to be at the same time each day contact is due to take place wherever possible.

It is worth remembering that the way in which contact is managed will impact on the child's life chances and that consideration of the impact on the child, both positive and negative must be part of the assessment process.

8. Suggested Reading List

Children's, Young People's and Parents' Perspectives on Contact: Findings from the Evaluation of Social Work Practices", Cath Larkins, Julie Ridley, Nicola Farrelly, Helen Austerberry, Andy Bilson, Shereen Hussein, Jill Manthorpe, & Nicky Stanley

British Journal of Social Work, August 21st 2013

The authors report children's, young people's and parents' views on birth family contact across eleven Local Authorities between 2009-2012 as part of the evaluation of Social Work Practice pilots, which included interviews with 169 children and 19 parents.

Contact with birth family has been identified as a high priority by children (Sinclair 2005), and one of the top three areas in which they seek more influence in decisions (Morgan 2012). The limited research evidence regarding birth parents confirms the importance they place on contact, and the role of professionals within this (Schofield & Ward 2011). Safeguarding issues also affect contact (Sinclair 2005), highlighting the balance involved in these decisions.

What does belonging to a family and building a sense of home mean to children in long-term foster care?

'A Sense of Belonging: Meanings of Family and Home in Long-Term Foster Care', Nina Biehal, British Journal of Social Work, 2012, pp.1-17

Permanence for looked after children is a key policy objective, but understanding how children reconcile their position in two families to achieve a sense of belonging remains under explored. This paper considers this regarding children in long term stable placements.

High-frequency family contact: a road to nowhere for infants, Humphreys and Kiraly, Child and Family Social Work, 2011, 16, 1-11

This article reports on a study conducted in Australia and addresses 'problems that have arisen' since courts began ordering high frequency contact - four to seven times a week for infants under twelve months. The study explored the concerns of child protection workers and foster carers that these decisions are not in the best interests of infants.

The issues have relevance in this country for professionals making decisions on contact for infants subject to proceedings. Research methods are detailed in the article, and included data mining of electronic child protection files, interviews, case studies and focus groups. Birth parents were not included in the research for ethical reasons, but the authors argue that their perspective should be sought, and that longitudinal research about the impact on infants is also needed.

Humphreys and Kiraly consider the literature on the effect of nurture on early brain development and attachment. For infants placed away from home the issues are complex; a continued relationship with birth parents is important, especially when decisions regarding reunification have not been made. The child also needs to establish an appropriate attachment with their primary carer if the impact of disruption with birth parents is to be ameliorated.

Care Planning and Review for Looked After Children: Fifteen Years of Slow Progress? N Thomas, British Journal of Social Work, Volume 41, Number 2, March 2011, p387-398

Thomas reviews progress in planning and reviewing for looked after children and considers the available research in this area which, he suggests, has not matched policy and practice developments. The article will be of interest to all working with children in care, particularly those seeking greater involvement for these children in planning and review processes.

Of particular relevance here is the statutory review requirement and the importance of consultation and participation within this.

Contact between children in out-of-home placement and their family and friends networks: a research review

R Sen and K Broadhurst in Child and Family Social Work, 2011

In this article the authors provide a detailed narrative review of the available knowledge of contact between children in out of home placement and their family and friendship networks. Given the breadth of the subject, it provides a useful overview and helpfully summarises good practice pointers, highlighting key areas for further work. The methodology, including constraints, is detailed in the article.

Guidance issued with the Children Act 1989, and subsequent social work practice, carries the presumption of contact should children not remain in their birth families. Much research supports the benefits of this, but there is also substantial research highlighting potential disadvantages. In recent years the increasing numbers of children entering the care system due to neglect has resulted in a re-examination of this presumption.

Sen and Broadhurst looked at supervised and unsupervised contact. Supervision was most likely to occur with children under five and if there were concerns for the child's safety or parent's presentation during contact. Sinclair (2005) found a large increase in contact between looked after children and birth relatives since the 1989 Act, with only one in six of these children having no contact with any birth relatives.

Contact between looked after children and their parents: A level playing field?

John Triseliotis, Adoption and Fostering, Volume 34, No 3, 2010

The emphasis on maintaining contact between children in care and parents, or adopted children and birth parents has increased over the past twenty years. In this article Triseliotis considers how these decisions are made, questions what criteria are used and whether these are appropriate to the reality of the situation.

Baby on Board. Report of the Infants in Care and Family Contact Research Project.

Humphries & Kiraly, University of Melbourne. February 2009, ISBN. 9780734040695

This was a small study conducted in Victoria, Australia. It considered 119 cases and input from 11 focus groups with a total of 118 participants. The study reviewed cases that came before the Children's Court in which contact between a child less than 12 months of age and their parents were offered contact at a rate of between 4 and 7 times a week. The study found that the high frequency of contact for some children did not improve the rate of family reunification. 22% of children who saw parents 4 times a week returned home and 23% of those who saw parents 7 times a week returned home.

Concurrent Planning - Early Permanence for Babies in Care Proceedings

Intensive contact with birth parents: implications for the emotional development of infants and young children placed in foster care

Coram Practice Notes

"Concurrent planning: a retrospective study of the continuities and discontinuities of care, and their impact on the development of infants and young children placed for adoption by the Coram Concurrent Planning Project" Kenrick J (2009) Adoption & Fostering 33(4) 5-17

This study was a small-scale, retrospective, qualitative study that sought to explore the tensions implicit in seeking to maintain and nurture existing attachments between birth parents and family and to maintain and develop new attachments with foster /adoptive carers.

Coram Concurrent Planning Study: interim report July 2012

Sophie Laws, Rebekah Wilson and Sumi Rabindrakumar, Coram Policy and Research Team

Coram is the only specialist centre for concurrent planning practice in the UK and is undertaking a study to examine the social, emotional and educational outcomes for the children who have reached permanency through the scheme.

These are short studies and can be downloaded from the **Coram site**.

Selwyn. J (2004) Placing older children in new families: changing patterns of contact, In Neil, E and Howe D (eds) Contact in Adoption and Permanent Foster care: Research, theory and practice, London. CoramBAAF.

Selwyn (2004) conducted a study on contact and 21% of the children in her study were physically or sexually abused during unsupervised contact with family members. Sinclair's study unsurprisingly found that for those children who had been abused it was important to restrict contact, or cease contact altogether with the family member/members responsible. For those children with unrestricted contact with birth family, there was a higher likelihood of re abuse after return home or during contact than for those children with well managed and planned contact arrangements.

Contact for infants subject to care proceedings

Schofield G & Simmonds J (2011), Family Law 41, June 2011 pp 70-74, Adoption and Fostering, Vol 35 No 4 pp70-75

Schofield and Simmonds commented on the study by Kenrick.

"The main concern for the infants from this study was the constant disruption to their daily routine. Unsettled and distressed or shut off and unresponsive infants would be brought back from contact, perhaps settle and recover during the evening, only to set off again the next day. This pattern was rarely limited to a specified period of assessment but continued through proceedings, including where final hearings were delayed. In contrast, on days with no contact it was possible for carers to allow the infant a relaxed day in which feeding, sleeping play and interaction with carers could follow the infants' natural rhythms- with both physical and psychological benefits."

They go on to point out *"The most important issue, therefore, for infant development in relation to contact plans is the degree to which contact arrangements produce high levels of stress for the infant through discontinuity of care and potentially insensitive care during contact"* Available from **Research in Practice**.

Is all contact between children in care and their birth parents 'good' contact?

Dr Stephanie Taplin, Centre for Parenting and Research, New South Wales Department of Community Services, December 2005 ISBN 0 7310 4388 X.

The focus of the paper was on contact with older children in long term care, predominantly foster care, where a decision has been made for the child to remain living away from the birth family in the long term. Findings concluded that levels of contact bore no relevance to reunification.

It also found that attachment in relation to children in care is a complex issue. It cannot be assumed that the maintenance of attachments is a sufficient reason to promote frequent contact between birth parents and children. It can be argued that by promoting contact with a parent where an infant has a dysfunctional attachment the contact impedes the establishment of a more positive and functional relationship with the carer.

Contact Arrangements for Children: A Call for Views

Department of Education, Martin Narey, Adoption advisor to the Government, July 2012

Martin Narey reported on contact arrangements for children in care in particular those for whom the plans were that they would be placed for adoption. In particular he focuses on timescales and reduction of contact when a placement order is granted.

Decision Making Within a Child's Timeframe

Working paper 16, Rebecca Brown and Harriet Ward, Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre, October 2012.

An overview of current research evidence for family justice professionals concerning child development and the impact of maltreatment.

This document provides an overview of the impact on children of delays in the Court process. It is an overview of research evidence which was commissioned in response to the Family Justice Review recommendations for training and development for Family Justice professionals and includes a greater emphasis on child development.

Mackaskill C (2002) Safe Contact? Children in permanent placement and contact with their birth relatives. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.

Mackaskill (2002) looked at contact for children in permanent placements and their birth families. He found that contact with members of a birth family can be harmful or challenging for a child in a permanent placement, particularly contact with relatives who have mistreated them. Mistreatment included chronic neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Mackaskill found that the proportion of children suffering negative consequences from contact was twice the proportion for whom contact had a positive effect. Problems include feelings of divided loyalty, emotional and behavioural difficulties, set-backs in progress made in placement and in some cases continued abuse during the contact.

Moyers S et al (2005) British Journal of Social Work, 36, 541-559, Contact with Family members and its impact on adolescents and foster placements

This study was based on the impact on adolescents / young people in foster care on contact with their families.