**Practice Guidance for Indirect Family Time between Children in Our Care and their Family Members**

Family time arrangements are referred to in [Tri X our Children and Families Policy Manuel](https://devonchildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_contact_parents.html#approving). This policy outlines the purpose for family time and what needs to be considered when making decisions about family time arrangements.

This guidance is for indirect family time only. This may be planned indirect family time as part of the child’s Care Plan, or it may be indirect family time organised in the event it is not possible for direct family time to take place as scheduled.

**Glossary**

***Family time*** refers to contact between a child in our care and a member of their family or connected person

***Family member*** refers to any member of the birth family or connected person the child is due to have family time with e.g. parents, grandparents, god parents, sisters and brothers.

***Direct*** refers to face-to-face family time

***Indirect*** refers to non-face-to-face to family time

***Foster Carer*** is referenced but this can also refer to connected carer, residential home key worker

**In the Event Non-Court Ordered Family Time is Not Able to Happen**

All children in our care will have family time considered as part of their Care Plan. For most of our children, family time will be direct and take place during school holidays/and or weekends.

Where the child’s Care Plan recommends no family time or indirect family time only, these children’s Care Plans will continue as is, however adjustments to the frequency of indirect family time may be temporary changed to, for example, alleviate family members anxieties about each other’s wellbeing. An alternative may be to increase communication between the social worker and/or carer with the family member to share information about the child’s wellbeing.

For children in our care with a Care Plan of direct family time, where direct family time is unable to take place, for example health guidance for social distancing, this does not mean we are stopping family time or are failing in our duty to promote, allow and facilitate family time, it just means we are promoting family time and relationships in a different way.

**Talking to Family Members**

When direct family time cannot take place, family members will likely be disappointed, and we are to be sensitive to this and remember some family members have limited time with the children throughout the year.

Family members are to be reassured any decisions to change a direct family time arrangement has not been taken lightly and reasons for the decision are to be given, e.g.

* Promote and protect the health of both households (birth family and child’s)
* Health and safety of household members for example in extreme weather conditions

Family members are to be reassured family time can be promoted indirectly in a number of ways such as:

* Phone calls
* Video sharing
* Video calls (WhatsApp, skype, face time etc.)
* Letters and/or cards
* Photo exchanges
* Sending pictures/drawings from the children to family members

**Risk Assessment**

The child’s current risk assessment for direct family time will need updating to reflect the risk of direct family time continuing and any steps which are available to mitigate this risk. Where the risk cannot be mitigated, a risk assessment will need to be drawn up for indirect family time. A suggested template has been made available for this purpose, see Risk Assessment Tool (Appendix 1). The risk assessment should be completed in consultation with the child’s Carer.

Decisions as to the type of indirect arrangements which will be facilitated should be made prior to informing the family member of the change to direct family time. This will allow for family members to have clarity there and then as to what their family time will look like going forward and why this decision has been made.

A Risk Assessment Tool (Appendix 1) has been provided for this purpose and we are able to use the information in the child’s risk assessment for direct family time to help us plan.

The risk assessment should be informed by the following:

* Health status for either household or child
* Known behaviour and commitment of family member towards family time
* Known behaviour of the child before and after family time
* Child’s wishes and feelings and practical ability to facilitate indirect family time
* Foster carers wishes and feelings and practical ability to facilitate indirect family time
* Family member’s wishes and feelings and practical ability to facilitate indirect family time

Upon completion, the risk assessment is authorised by the worker’s supervisor and uploaded to the child’s file. The risk assessment will need to be kept under review and be updated in response to the above principles changing.

**Expectations**

Normally a working agreement is signed by a family member agreeing to adhere to expectations to ensure family time is safe and positive for the child as possible. Where face to face meetings with family members are possible within timescales of indirect family time taking place, agreement to the expectations can be achieved through several ways, for example:

* Verbal consultation – with the date, time clearly recorded on the child’s file
* Text message of agreement from the family member – uploaded to the child’s file
* Email confirmation of agreement from the family member – uploaded to the child’s file
* Postal letter from family members - uploaded to the child’s file

Expectations can only be met if we are clear with family members what our expectations are through reading these to the family member and answering any questions. We can follow this up by providing a copy of the expectations either by email, post etc. The expectations can be recorded in the Indirect Family Time Planner (Appendix 2). The Supervised Contact Service have provided a guidance for undertaking indirect family time and what will happen during the session, this can be explained to family members and Carers and can be found in Carer Guidance for Facilitating Indirect Family Time (Appendix 3).

A copy of the expectations will be shared with the following:

* Child (in a child friendly format)
* Foster Carer
* Foster Carer’s Supervising Social Worker
* Independent Reviewing Officer
* Supervised Contact Team (where applicable)

**Foster Carers**

Foster Carers are supported by their Supervising Social Worker’s and where applicable the Supervised Contact Team. Carers are kept up to date with changes to family time expectations through support, supervision and frequent newsletters.

There are lots of creative ideas available, however, we need to ensure we are sensitive to any anxieties a Carer may have over family time expectations as and when they arise. Please keep in touch with the Supervising Social Worker and Supervising Contact Team and where we know indirect family time has taken place, ensure the record of this is read and any concerns responded to and the risk assessment updated if necessary.

It may have been risk assessed that it is not suitable for Carers to contact a family member directly, in these instances we will have to act as the go between to share photos, emails, videos and letters using the various technology open to us at this time.

Where it is suitable for a Foster Carer to liaise directly with the family member, the Foster Carer will be provided with guidance (see Risk Assessment (Appendix 1) and Carer’s Guidance (Appendix 3)) as to the supervision and monitoring of content required.

Family Time –Tips for Using Video Chats – can be found here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/tjo7ajde18vbyoo/RCCF_Tips%20for%20using%20video%20chats%20for%20family%20time_March%202020.pdf?dl=0>

Suggestions of indirect family time to a Carer can be, but not inclusive of:

* Writing letters on behalf of the children to the family members about what they have been doing
* Taking photos of day to day activities for sharing to reassure family members of child’s physical wellbeing
* Taking videos of special activities such as garden based treasure hunt, birthday cake making, etc.
* Purchasing items for the child on behalf of the family member, for example, purchasing a gift and taking a photo of them with it, purchasing birthday cards and writing a message from the family member inside.
* Supporting children to write to family members, draw pictures and make cards, taking photos (to share via email) or posting these in the normal post.

**Family Members**

Where it is not suitable for family members to have personal contact details for the Carer e.g. home addresses, email, phone number etc. it will be necessary for family members to use us as a go between, for example, photos and videos to be sent to Supervised Contact Keyworker/Social Worker’s WhatsApp, email and to be passed on to the Carer, other items such as letters, cards etc. can be scanned or photographed and emailed to the Carer with the hard copy shared at a later date for life story purposes.

Family members can be encouraged to be creative in their exchange of indirect materials but may need guidance and support for this in order to meet the expectations of them. For example, a family with learning needs may verbally provide a message/letter to the child which we will write up on their behalf.

**Children**

The majority of our children will be disappointed when they cannot see their family members face to face. Children will need to be reassured family time will continue but in a different way. Children should have the reasons for the changes explained to them in an age appropriate manner. Children should be encouraged to come up with their own creative ideas of how they wish to communicate with their family members. For example, if it is letters/cards/pictures, children to pick, design their own, chose the words, draw pictures, paints etc. Children can be reassured family members have received the indirect materials via their Social Worker and/or family member where appropriate.

It is important for the child’s wishes and feelings to inform the risk assessment and the proposals for the indirect family time. These might change as indirect family time progresses and we will need to be flexible in our approach and remember it is the child’s choice.

**Refusal to Cooperate**

If family members refuse to co-operate in using any alternative processes to facilitate indirect family time or the indirect arrangements are causing significant harm to a child which cannot be managed, and all attempts of working with family members has failed to reach a consensus and a safe way forward, we will need to make an application to the Court under section 34(4) or s34(6) of the Children Act 1989 to suspend family time.

This should always be a last resort and we will have needed to have exhausted all opportunities to promote and facilitate safe family time before making this application.

**Recording of Family Time**

Where the Carer or other nominated person is supervising indirect family time, they will need to be provided with the template Supervised ‘Indirect’ Family Time Record (Eclipse) (Appendix 4) and advised who to send this record to, this will change depending on the child and their area. For example, if the family time is normally supervised by the Supervised Contact Service, the record will be sent to them, if it is normally the Social Worker, they will upload to the child’s file. The email addresses for the Supervised Contact Service are contained in Appendix 3 and 4.

**Children with Court Directed Family Time**

Where children have an Interim Care Plan before the Court or Court ordered family time, the expectation is as far as possible, for direct family time to continue. In the event this is not possible, and this decision is underpinned by a risk assessment, the direct family time will need to be changed to indirect. It is likely children will be having frequent direct family time during care proceedings, so where possible, the frequency of indirect family time should remain the same, although it is recognised the likely duration of each session will be shorter.

Unlike children in our permanent care, these changes will need to be agreed by the Court and all parties should be consulted beforehand:

* All parties to proceedings
* Independent Reviewing Officer
* Family Members who are not a party but who had direct family time with the child
* Local Authority Solicitor
* Cafcass

As we will continue to promote and facilitate family time between the child and their family members, where there is agreed, it is unlikely an application to the Court under section 34(4) or s34(6) of the Children Act 1989 to suspend family time will be required. Legal advice will be provided on this matter by the solicitor.

Where a family member refuses the option of indirect family time, or indirect family time is not safe for the child, the Social Worker should seek legal advice on the consideration of an application under section 34(4) or s34(6) of the Children Act 1989 to suspend family time.

**Risk Assessment**

To support the discussion /consultation on changes to direct family time to indirect family time, the risk assessment for direct family time will need updating to reflect the risk of direct family time continuing and any steps which are available to mitigate this risk. Where the risk cannot be mitigated, the Risk Assessment Tool (Appendix 1) should be drawn up for indirect family time and the Carer consulted throughout.

For proposed changes to family time to be agreed in Court, it is likely a supporting statement will be required with the suggested areas below to be covered; however, you are to discuss this with the solicitor who will know the details of your care proceedings:

* The wishes and feelings or the child and family members
* How the proposed changes to family time will meet the needs of the child.
* Any impact on any current assessments and/or care planning arrangements for the child and how this impact will be mitigated against to not cause any undue delay for a child achieving permanence.

In particular circumstances, for example where babies are having family time to facilitate breast feeding arrangements, this will need to be factored into the overall Care Plan which will take into consideration the child’s health needs, risk to health and risk to the family members and professionals in facilitating this arrangement on an ongoing basis.

After agreement has been reached for the change of family time to indirect, the rest of the guidance applies.

**Appendices available are:**

[Appendix 1 Risk Assessment Tool](http://www.proceduresonline.com/devon/childcare/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/Risk%20Assessment%20for%20Indirect%20Family%20Time%20Appendix%201.docx)

[Appendix 2: Indirect Family Time Planner](http://www.proceduresonline.com/devon/childcare/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/Indirect%20Family%20Time%20Planner%20Appendix%202.docx)

[Appendix 3: Carer Guidance for Facilitating Indirect Family Time](http://www.proceduresonline.com/devon/childcare/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/Carer%20Guidance%20for%20Facilitating%20Indirect%20Family%20Time%20Appendix%203.docx)

[Appendix 4: Supervised ‘Indirect’ Family Time Record (Eclipse)](http://www.proceduresonline.com/devon/childcare/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/Supervised%20%27Indirect%27%20Family%20Time%20Record%20%28Eclipse%29%20Appendix%204.docx)