

Family contact – information for foster carers

Children and young people tell us that continued contact with their families impacts positively on how they see themselves. Continued contact with their biological families is fundamental to children and young people in maintaining a sense of self-value and identity. It has significant effects on the emotional and physical development of children and young people and can help them deal with the grief and loss they experience when they leave their family and enter out-of-home care.

The painful feelings of separation can be displayed in a number of ways. Some children and young people may outwardly demonstrate emotions such as anger and hurt while others may internalise their feelings by repressing them. Bedwetting and self-harming may indicate that a child or young person is internalising their emotions. The short-term benefits for children and young people in maintaining family contact while placed in care may help alleviate some of the emotional and physical problems they experience.



The long-term benefits for children and young people maintaining family contact include:

- a greater understanding and connection with their family and culture, which helps build their identity
- an ability to view their family in a realistic way, enabling them to have appropriate expectations of their family and relationships
- an opportunity to develop relationships in a safe and supportive environment
- a sense of stability, continuity, predictability and security.

Continued family contact may be difficult for the carer or the child or young person. However, the benefits for children and young people in maintaining contact outweigh the negatives if handled in a caring and sensitive manner.

What are the responsibilities of the department in maintaining family contact?

Given the importance of family contact for children and young people placed in care, the Department of Child Safety is committed to ensuring that positive and meaningful contact occurs between the child or young person and their family. The department has a responsibility to provide the opportunity for contact between a child or young person and their parents and appropriate members of their family, as often as appropriate. The department also has the ability to place restrictions on family contact and may refuse contact in certain circumstances, though this only occurs in a minority of cases.

The Statement of Standards, found in Section 122 of the *Child Protection Act 1999*, explains what a carer's responsibilities are in relation to family contact. The Statement of Standards states that 'the child will be encouraged to maintain family and other significant personal relationships'.

Contact with family and community is also a principle in the Act. See the fact sheets *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle* and *Legislative requirements to ensure quality care* for more information.

Your Child Safety Officer will determine the nature and frequency of family contact, taking into account the views of the child or young person, their family and their career or licensed care service.

What is the role of foster carers in maintaining family contact?

As a foster carer, you are responsible for providing day-to-day care for the child or young person and you are often in the best position to encourage family contact. You can help the biological parents continue to be involved with daily decisions and care arrangements for the child or young person in your care.

Family contact can be difficult for carers for a variety of reasons. There may be conflict between the carer and parents about the amount of time required for contact and the behaviour of the child or young person before or after contact. You should contact your Child Safety Officer immediately if you have any concerns in regard to the way family contact is progressing or being managed.

What can I do to maintain family contact?

- Ask the family about aspects of the child or young person's care and keep them informed of events in the child or young person's life, such as school sports days.
- Be positive when discussing a child or young person's family when the child or young person is present.
- Encourage and support the child or young person before and after family contact. Help them plan for a visit by thinking of things to do and talk about, and what to expect.
- Accept that contact may cause the child or young person to revisit feelings of anger, sadness and confusion and that this may lead to a variety of behaviour. Listen to the child or young person and help them talk about their family without asking probing questions.
- Be open when talking about what is happening in the child or young person's life and accept there may be times when they do not want to talk. Give them opportunities to talk when they are ready.
- Take photographs and share information about

important events, focussing on the positive aspects of contact. Encourage swapping photos, sharing drawings and school and sports information.

What can I do when family contact is difficult?

- Explore why a child or young person may be behaving in a certain way before or after contact with their family. You can talk about it during case planning sessions where parents, support workers and carers meet to address issues. Refer to the fact sheet *Case planning* for more information.
- Contribute to the team effort to find creative ways for a child or young person to feel good about family contact. This may not always mean regular visits, but can include contact with extended family members.
- Access support from other carers, your support worker or community services to help you maintain family contact in a way that meets both your needs and the needs of the child.

You can talk to your Child Safety Officer or other support person about problems you may experience in maintaining family contact. The fact sheet *Support for carers* provides contact details and more information about support available to carers.

For more information visit www.childsafety.qld.gov.au

Or contact the Department of Child Safety on **1800 811 810** or **3224 8045**.

