

Providing foster and kinship care

Maintaining family contact



Children and young people in out-of-home care tell us that continued contact with their families has a positive impact on how they see themselves and their sense of self-value and identity.

Maintaining family contact has a significant impact on a child or young person's emotional and psychological development and can help them deal with any grief and loss they may experience when they leave their families 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 and repress their feelings. Bedwetting and self-harming may indicate that a child or young person is internalising their emotions.

The short-term benefits of maintaining family contact include helping to alleviate some of the emotional and psychological problems that children and young people experience when they enter out-of-home care.

The long-term benefits for children and young people maintaining family contact may 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 both the carer and the child or young person. For instance, a kinship carer may experience changes in existing relationships with the child or young person's family. However, the benefits far outweigh the negatives if handled in a caring and sensitive manner.

The role of the department in maintaining family contact

The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services 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. However, the department can also place restrictions on family contact and may refuse contact in certain circumstances, though this only occurs in a minority of cases.

The Child Safety Service Centre Manager or Team Leader are the delegated officers to decide the level and nature of family contact, taking into account the views of the child or young person, their family and their carer or licensed care service.

The role of foster and kinship carers in maintaining family contact

As a 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 help children in care to cope better with the difficulties of transition.

Family contact arrangements are decided within the case planning process and recorded in the child or young person's case plan. A carer's participation or role in family contact is negotiated and documented in the case plan and placement agreement documents.

Family contact can be difficult for carers for a number 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 about the way family contact is progressing or being managed.

The Statement of Standards, found in Section 122 of the *Child Protection Act 1999* (the Act) 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. Refer to Carer fact sheet 6: *Understanding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle*.

For more information about the legislative requirements, refer to the Prospective carer fact sheet 5: *Foster and Kinship care – Legislative requirements to providing care*.

What can I do to maintain family contact?

Where it is considered in the child's best interests and documented in the case plan, the carer or staff member of a licensed care service or another entity may encourage or participate in family contact arrangements. Some of the following tips may be useful for carers who are keen to promote the capacity of family contact to meet a child's needs.

- 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 behaviours.

Listen to the child or young person and encourage them to 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 when a child or young person's parents, support workers and carers meet to address issues. Refer to Carer fact sheet 10: *Case planning and Placement Agreements* 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. Carer fact sheet 3: *Support for carers* provides contact details and more information about support available to carers.

For more information

To find out more information about maintaining family contact:

- call the department's general enquiries on **1800 811 810** or **3224 8045**
- visit www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety
- visit your local child safety service centre
- call Foster Care Queensland on **3256 6166**.