



Contact - Information Sheet

Children in the care of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Department of Communities (the Department) usually have contact with their parents, siblings, extended family, close friends and sometimes previous carers. This allows children to maintain important relationships which are essential to a child's identity, culture and their sense of belonging.

Face-to-face visits are most common, but other forms of contact include phone calls, email, letters, skype and text messaging.

For children who don't have regular contact with their parents, the role of extended family is critical. In the case of Aboriginal children, people who are regarded as significant in the child's network under customary law or tradition are included in the term 'extended family'.

The benefits of contact

Contact can have many benefits for the child, their parents and the rest of their family. Contact is an integral part of the planning process used to support the child's development, build and maintain their positive relationships and to meet their best interests. Well planned contact can:

- maintain and strengthen parent/child relationships;
- preserve important family and cultural connections;
- ease the pain of separation for both the child and their family;
- reassure the child of their parents wellbeing and help them adjust to being in care;
- keep parents up-to-date with their child's development and interests;
- maintain and enhance sibling relationships, particularly where siblings are not living together;
- allow parents to engage in everyday activities with their child such as feeding, toileting, combing hair etc; and
- provide opportunity for parents to work on areas of parenting that may need development.

Developing contact arrangements

All members of the child's care team will be invited to participate in *Signs of Safety* meetings to discuss the plans for contact. It is important that everyone works together so that the needs of the child and their safety remains the focus.



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Contact arrangements will be recorded in the *Signs of Safety Assessment and Case Planning Form* and copies will be given to all members of the child's care team. Everyone's role and the purpose for contact should be detailed in this document.

Child's wishes in contact

It is important that the child's opinions be heard when devising a Contact Plan. The Department is committed to seeking the child's views about contact even if all their wishes cannot be met.

Frequency of contact

The amount and type of contact that a child has will depend on the plan for the child.

Where the plan is for a child to return home, contact with parents needs to be face-to-face and regular, to support and assess the likelihood of reunification. The need for children, and particularly infants, to settle into a stable and predictable environment with you as their carer is important in order to repair the effects of disrupted relationships they have already experienced.

Where a child is in permanent out-of-home care, contact will usually be less frequent and may include indirect forms of contact. However, there is no need for contact with parents or family to stop so long as the contact is considered positive and in the child's best interests.

Location of contact

Venues for contact visits should be comfortable, safe and informal to enable parents to act as naturally as possible. Ideally, contact visits should take place in a home-like environment provided it is safe. Parks, cafes or other recreational type facilities can also be suitable venues for contact.

The Department's Enhanced Contact Centres can provide suitable child and family-friendly environments for contact in the metropolitan area. The centres are for children aged 0-5 years and their parents and allow Department workers to assist parents with contact in a supportive environment.

Supervised contact

It is common for contact to be supervised. There are a number of reasons this may occur including:



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- To support and facilitate the interaction between the parent and child.
- To develop parenting and child management skills.
- To observe the contact for the purpose of assessment.
- To ensure the safety and emotional wellbeing of the child.

Supervision will usually be carried out by a Department family resource employee, or may be undertaken by the child protection worker. In some cases individuals such as family members, carers, or in Aboriginal communities, community members may supervise contact arrangements. It is important that this be agreed upon as part of the formal contact arrangements.

Support during contact

Contact can be difficult for everyone involved. However, the long-term benefits outweigh the negatives when contact is well planned and handled in a caring and sensitive manner.

It is the Department's job to work with parents to support positive contact with their child. Workers can discuss ideas for contact activities along with the child's current interests and daily routines to help parents prepare for contact visits. Workers can also help parents to prepare for a range of possible responses from children during contact. Being prepared helps parents to respond in a calm, clear and sensitive manner to any distressed or difficult behaviours from the child during contact.

You, as a carer, also play an important role in contact. Because you provide the day-to-day care of the child, you are often best placed to prepare and encourage children for contact visits. You can help by giving the child things to take to contact to show their family such as drawings, school work and photos. You can also help by encouraging additional contact such as phone calls or emails.

Managing a child's behaviour before or after contact can be difficult. If you have concerns about how contact is going or if you are having trouble managing contact arrangements, you should seek assistance from the child protection worker.

Suspending or cancelling contact

There may be times when the Department needs to cancel contact. All efforts will be made to set up another visit as soon as possible. Where you or another family member needs to cancel a contact visit, the child protection worker should be notified as soon as possible so that all relevant parties can be notified.



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Contact may also be suspended or cancelled where risks are considered significant or where it is not believed to be in the child's best interests to continue to have contact with certain people. Other than in emergency situations where a child's safety and wellbeing may be compromised by contact, a meeting will be held to provide clear information to relevant parties about the reasons why contact is being suspended or cancelled and to consider ways of overcoming these difficulties.

Review of contact decisions

If you are unhappy with a contact decision, you should speak to your child protection worker. Alternatively you can ask to speak to the Team Leader or the District Director at your local district office to ask them to review the decision. If the issue cannot be resolved at your local district office, then you can make a complaint through the Department's Complaints Management Unit. The Complaint's Kit is available on the Department's website.

If the contact arrangements have been made as part of a Care Plan meeting, you can ask for the decision to be reviewed by the Care Plan Review Panel. A Care Plan Review Brochure is available from your local district office.

Useful Contacts

Department of Communities

Telephone (08) 9222 2653 Country free call: 1800 622 258

Website: www.communities.wa.gov.au

Family Inclusion Network WA (FINWA)

Is a not-for-profit agency that provides advocacy and support services to parents and family members who have had their children placed care.

Telephone: (08) 9328 6434 Website: www.finwa.org.au

Foster Care Association of WA

Is a not-for-profit agency that provides support and assistance to foster carers including family carers.

Telephone: (08) 9384 5577

Country free call: 1800 641 911