



North Tyneside Council

Family Time in North Tyneside Children's Services

Arrangements for Family Time in North Tyneside

North Tyneside Local Authority Children's Services model of practice is Signs of Safety and in keeping with the model they have determined that contact should be called Family Time. Should Family Time be referred to as contact this will be because Legislation / Guidance is being quoted.

The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review documentation details the arrangements for contact as being a key principle within the Children Act 1989:

“One of the key principles of the Children Act 1989... is the presumption that there should be continued contact between the child and their family while the child is in the care of the local authority... Contact arrangements should be focused on, and shaped around, the child's needs. The child's welfare is the paramount consideration at all times and each child's wishes and needs for contact should be individually considered and regularly assessed. For many children, relationships with members of their family, previous carers, friends and others are valued. For some children some form of contact may provide a positive aid to a successful placement. Contact can be very important in helping children and young people develop their sense of identity and understand their lives and their sense of self”.

Principles of Family Time

North Tyneside Children's Services have determined a key set of principles should inform practice when assessing, planning for, arranging and reviewing family time arrangements. This includes the following:

- There is a presumption of family time between children who are looked after and their parents, sisters and brothers, any relative, friend or other person connected with the child unless it is not reasonably practicable or consistent with the child's welfare;
- Family time with significant people may have been lost and consideration should be given as to how this can be re-established;
- Where children have moved on from care givers, family time should be maintained unless this is not in the child's interests. Sometimes, following an unplanned ending feelings are high and it is important that children and young people have an opportunity to repair damaged relationships and family time should always be considered to say goodbyes and to give the opportunity for future on-going relationships;
- Family time must always be for the benefit of the child and not the parent/relative or friend;

- Family time should only be supervised where it is necessary to ensure children are safeguarded and their welfare promoted;
- Where family time needs to be supervised then this is better if it can be undertaken by someone familiar to the child, an extended family member, friend or a key worker / care giver wherever possible;
- The role of the foster carer in family time should be carefully considered in the planning stages of contact. All foster carers/ caregivers have a role to play in family time. Wherever possible foster carers should transport and support with family time arrangements, including supervision of family time. This should be arranged in a planned way in consultation with the Supervising Social Worker and allocated Social Worker for the child(ren);
- Any transport arrangements should allow plenty of time for the child or young person to enable them to arrive on time and feeling as relaxed as possible and so that the time with their family is not reduced because of transport getting them there late. Equally, any travel arrangements made for the journey back should allow the full time for contact. If transport arrives before the end of the session, there should not be the expectation that the child or young person will leave earlier than planned;
- Family time should take place in venues that are appropriate for children and young people; given their ages and who they are meeting up with. An office building is not usually a good place to have family time;
- Family time should be fun and enjoyable for children and young people but not necessarily costly. (DO FOSTER CARERS GET A DISCOUNT CARD FOR NT)
- The assessment about family time and the subsequent arrangements will take into consideration the ethnicity, culture and language needs (including those where English is not their first language) of children, young people and their families. Where contact / family time is to be supervised, the assessment should consider if the use of interpreters is required;
- Children and young people have a choice about who they wish to see and have the right to change their minds about this over time;
- Maintaining family time with sisters and brothers from both the same or different parents is reported by children to be one of their highest priorities and every effort must be made to ensure this is supported;
- The Network Meeting as a decision making and care plan review forum can be helpful in agreeing a plan for supporting family time;

- Family time should not be seen as a reward or punishment and should be remembered that it is a child's right to have family time, unless this is not in the best interest of the child;
- Family time should be reviewed regularly within the Network Meetings and within Looked after Reviews to ensure that it continues to meet children's needs.

Planning Family Time

Family time should be consistent with the child's Care Plan this should take account of any Contact Order that may be in place.

The purpose of family time and how it will be evaluated must be made clear in the Plan. Family Time should be focused on, and shaped around, the needs of the child.

The child's welfare is the paramount consideration at all times and each child's wishes and needs for family time should be individually considered this can be done by using advocacy services, if necessary. Family time can be very important in helping children develop their sense of identity and to allow them to understand their life to date.

The wishes and feelings of parents and the child's care givers must be ascertained before a decision about family time is made or as far as it is reasonably practicable to do so.

Both direct and indirect family time arrangements should always be clearly detailed, setting out how it will take place, the venue, the frequency and how the arrangements will be reviewed. The use of mobile phones should also be considered.

Where a Children's Centre or community venue is being considered as a possible venue for family time, the risk assessment must be up to date so that everyone is aware of any issues and children, their families, staff and others in the community are safeguarded as far as possible.

Where family time is progressed as part of a plan to return the child to the parents' care, the Placement with Parents Regulations should be in place if the child is subject to an Interim Care Order or Care Order. Placements with Parent Regulations have to be signed by the Assistant Director for Children's Services and should initially be provided to your team manager.

Any family time with someone who has perpetrated domestic abuse or violence must be fully assessed, putting the child's safety and interest first, above any 'pro-contact' approach from the adult's perspective. Children and women can continue to be abused within a contact arrangement whether the family are living together or not.

Particular care must be given at times of separation and loss for perpetrators where risk might be heightened.

4. Different Types of Family Time

Face to face meetings and visits (direct family time) will generally be the best way of maintaining relationships, but other means such as emails, text messages, video calls, photograph exchanges etc. (indirect family time) should also be thought about.

Social Workers and care givers should work together to explore how electronic media can support positive relationships for children and young people. This could include the use of social media mechanisms such as Skype or FaceTime. Children should be supported to ensure they are safe online rather than this form of family time being avoided. It may be useful to encourage young people to discuss the ways they keep in touch with others (this could include by mobile phone, use of social networking sites and apps and through gaming consoles such as Xbox or PlayStation). These alternative ways of keeping in touch are part of young people's lives today and should be explored to see and explain how this can be done safely.

5. Babies and Contact

When assessing family time where babies are concerned, refer to the Family Time for Babies and Infants - Guidance

6. Family Time with Brothers and Sisters

The relationship between brothers and sisters is possibly the longest relationship that many people will have in their lives, often outlasting the relationship with parents, partners or friends. For this reason a strong sibling bond can be a vital support throughout life and for Children who are Looked After this kind of stability is especially important in a world where so much is out of their control.

Children of different ages can have siblings who remain at home or who are spread across multiple care placements or adopted separately. Every situation is unique, and there are numerous circumstances that may result in brothers and sisters not living together. Children should not have to experience yet another loss; by ensuring they have regular, high quality family time they are allowed to develop and maintain a healthy relationship with one another. Where children are placed with separate care givers, care givers should be supported to arrange regular family time between them. This could be visiting each other's houses for tea or both taking a trip to the park. These sessions should be normal everyday activities that do not require a significant cost.

Family time with birth parents or between brothers and sisters does not always have to take place with everyone attending together. Sometimes, individual time between a child and a parent can help develop and improve relationships and a contact arrangements that may be right for one child, may not meet the needs of another, and it is therefore important to look at the individual needs of children and make an informed decision based on a clear assessment of the child's needs and relationships with siblings and parents.

Children who are Looked After by the Local Authority talk about the over supervision of family time with their brothers and sisters and Social Workers need to be mindful of this. Family Time between siblings needs to be assessed and appropriate levels of support or supervision put in place if required, depending on the ages and circumstances of the children.

7. Unsupervised, Facilitated or Supervised Contact

Contact/family time will be unsupervised, facilitated or supervised.

Unsupervised contact means that the contact takes place with no-one else there with a specific role to facilitate, support or supervise the contact.

Facilitated contact is where some support is provided for the contact such as a room in a Contact Centre or a Children's Centre; and where possible, staff might greet everyone beforehand and pop in to ask if anything is needed. For Children's Centres, this would need to have been agreed with the setting prior to arranging the booking of the room.

Supervised contact involves someone allocated to be present throughout the whole session and a written record is kept.

The Social Worker should consider whether contact will need to be supervised as part of the assessment and planning process by the Social Worker and their Team Manager. It is the responsibility of the child's Social Worker to ensure that the person(s) supervising contact is appropriately skilled and experienced to do so.

When making a referral for supervised contact / family time, the Social Worker should get in touch with the relevant area Contact Centre. The Social Worker should have the information required ready to communicate. This is set out on the [Referral Information required by Contact Centre document](#).

8. Assessment of Contact / Family Time Arrangements

When making an assessment for contact, the [Guidance for Assessment of Contact / Family Time Arrangements \(triangle\) document](#) may be used. This guidance document provides detail about what to be considered about the needs

and views of the Children and Young People; the impact of parents and other visiting adults; and other factors. The primary focus of the assessment of this issue will be the safety and welfare of the child. A decision needs to be made, based on an assessment, as to whether any support or supervision of family time is required.

Where supervised contact is deemed necessary, the reasons should be clearly recorded and the role of the supervisor or supervisors clearly defined.

A written risk assessment must be completed before supervised contacts begin. A sample [Risk Assessment for Contact/ Family Time template](#) is available and this may be tailored for individual use.

This risk assessment must take account of all factors that could impact on the success of supervised contact and relevant safeguards including:

- a. Any history of abuse or threats of abuse to the child, carer givers, staff or others;
- b. Previous threats to disrupt contact or failure to cooperate with conditions agreed for supervised contact;
- c. Previous incidents or threats of abduction;
- d. Previous incidents of coercion or inappropriate behaviour during contact;
- e. Parent is threatening or emotionally abusive in their discourse with the child;
- f. The child's behaviour and needs, including medical needs.

Where any of the above features in the risk assessment, and supervised contact is to continue, the risk assessment must state the specific measures to be put in place to minimise risks. The assessment must then be approved and signed by the Social Worker's Team Manager.

Where supervised contact takes place, the detailed arrangements for the supervision must be set out in the Placement Plan.

In addition, there should be a written [Contact / Family Time Agreement](#) with the parents and other parties having supervised contact, signed by them, which should state clearly any specific conditions relating to the contact and any expectations placed on the parents, care givers and workers:

- The agreement should be clear about where the contact must take place and whether any flexibility is allowed for activity or movements within or away from the agreed location;
- It should also be clear about whether the person(s) having contact are permitted to give the child food, drinks, gifts or money during contact;

- It should state clearly the circumstances in which contact will be terminated;
- The agreement should state the adults who will be allowed to attend for supervised contact and supervisors should be asked to apply that strictly;
- Particular attention should be given to when and how visits are ended. It is probably best that all 'goodbyes' take place indoors with the visitors asked to leave before children to their placements;
- Significant changes to Care Plans, Court proceedings and/or decisions made about the frequency of future contact are all likely to be potential tension points so extra vigilance should apply at any contacts arranged around these times.

Social Workers must make sure that locations chosen for contact can accommodate any conditions agreed. Social Workers should try to ensure that locations for contact have appropriate space and age appropriate toys and equipment.

In more risky situations, those organising and supervising contact might want to choose locations where early and easy contact can be made with other parties or agencies such as the Police. In some cases prior contact with the Police should agree prearranged responses in the event of problems emerging

The staff and care givers and any other person involved in the supervision of the contact should have copies of the written agreement and sometimes the risk assessment.

Careful consideration should be given to whether family or known persons should be identified as the contact supervisor. This is especially the case when the plan is to place the child within the family. What would need to be considered is whether this arrangement would place too much pressure on the placement and whether the contact / family time would have sufficient structure for the child and parents.

Contact supervisors should read the Supervisors before carrying out contact.

Where possible, those supervising and or transporting the child to the contact should be known to the child and the family before the supervised contact takes place. This person should be the care giver or foster carer wherever possible.

The supervisor's observations of the contact must be clearly recorded in the child's record and shared with the parents.

The Supervisor should be proactive in stepping in to offer advice or support during contact where this is required due to the quality of the contact / family time that is taking place.

The supervisor must immediately report to the Social Worker any concerns or positive observations about the parents' conduct during the contact. The Social

Worker in consultation with his/her manager should consider the need to review the risk assessment and/or the contact arrangements in light of the concerns expressed.

9. What Information is Required for the Interim Care Plan, the Placement Plan, the Looked After Child Review and the Final Care Plan?

Interim Care Plan
The proposed contact arrangements only should be included in the Interim Care Plan.

Placement Plan
The proposed contact arrangements only should be included in the Placement Plan.

Looked After Child Review
By the time of the first looked after child review, assessment and analysis for contact must be carried out. The prompts for assessment and analysis are set out in the [Assessment for Contact / Family Time document](#) and should be included in the 'Care Plan/Social Worker Report for a Review' document on Mosaic in the 'Review of Contact / Family Time arrangements' box.

Final Care Plan
The proposed contact arrangements should be included in the Final Care Plan.

Any detail relating to the assessment and analysis for contact should be included in the Final Statement. This might be the Social Work Evidence Template (SWET) – Final Statement.

10. Review of Contact Arrangements

The social worker and their Team Manager should keep contact arrangements, including the continuing need for supervision, under regular review.

The risk assessment in relation to the arrangements for supervising contact must be reviewed at least every six months, or sooner, if any incident or report identifies concerns.

Any significant reactions that the child has to contact should be reported to the child's Social Worker by those observing contact arrangements, for example foster carers, residential staff and/or supervisors of contact.

The contact arrangements should also be reviewed in any Placement Planning Meeting and at the child's Looked after Review.

Where a [Contact Order](#) is in force and it is considered that the contact arrangements set out in the Order should be altered, the agreement of the child and

the parents should be sought and legal advice should be obtained as to the need to seek a variation of the Court Order.

11. Cancellation, Suspension or Termination of Contact

Contact should never be cancelled unless there is a very good reason, e.g. it is deemed that it would not be safe for it to take place or the child/adult/sibling attending is too unwell for it to take place or the child is not wishing to attend. Contact should take place in accordance with the child's Placement Plan, Court Order and any Court Directions.

Sometimes some foster carers and Social Workers think that because contact can upset a particular child or young person, they feel that they should reduce it or cancel it altogether; yet many times the child or young person would like contact to continue regardless. In each case, the child or young person should be consulted before any decision like this is made that affects them.

Wherever possible, the care giver should consult the child's Social Worker in advance if they consider there is a good reason to cancel the contact.

If contact is cancelled, the Social Worker or, if the Social Worker is not available, the care giver must ensure that the child and, as far as practicable, the parent or other adult is informed in advance and that the reason for the decision is explained. The Social Worker or staff/care giver should arrange an alternative contact if appropriate; if the child is not wishing to attend another session will not be rearranged.

If contact does not take place and consultation has not been possible with the Social Worker, the care giver must inform the child's Social Worker as soon as possible and confirm in writing the decision to cancel and the reason.

N.B. Contact arrangements must not be withdrawn as a Sanction imposed on a child.

Emergency restrictions on contact can only be made to protect the child from significant risk and must be notified to the Placing Authority (child's Social Worker) within 24 hours.

Any proposal to suspend or terminate the contact should be considered as part of the child's [Looked After Review](#), unless the circumstances require an urgent decision to be made, in which case the Social Worker must be consulted and legal advice should be obtained.

Any such proposal should be made in the context of the overall aims and objectives of the [Care Plan](#).

Even where it is not possible to hold a Looked after Review because of the urgency of the situation, the reasons for the proposal must be explained to the parents and to the child, and their agreement obtained if possible.

Where the proposal is to suspend the contact, the length and purpose of the suspension together with the basis upon which contact will be reinstated must be made clear.

Where the child is the subject of an [Emergency Protection Order](#), [Interim Care Order](#) or full [Care Order](#), an application to the Court for authority to terminate the contact will always be necessary, if contact is to be suspended for more than 7 days. As soon as such a decision is made, Legal Services should be contacted as a matter of urgency so that the necessary court action can be initiated.

Written confirmation of the decision made and, where relevant, the intended curt application, together with the reasons, must be sent to the parents/relevant parties, child (depending on age) and any other relevant person (for example the child's advocate, an [Independent Visitor](#) or [Children's Guardian](#)). Staff/carers and other agencies involved with the child's care must also be informed.

12. Recording of Contact

When should contact be recorded and what is the purpose of recording?

- Aid decision making in the courts during care proceedings and for other assessments by providing a summary and analysis about the rationale for the Contact / Family Time proposal and explain why the proposal is in the child's best interest. This kind of recording should entail detailed observations. Under these circumstances, a copy must be provided to the parents;
- Provide a record for the child or the parent(s) about the time spent together; a record of shared memories.

Where contact is unsupervised or facilitated - a summary of any key observations of the contact experience and any issues arising from it that come to the Social Worker's attention should be recorded. This might include feedback from care givers about the child's mood, behaviour and presentation before or following contact.

Who should record contact?

Contact / Family Time should be recorded by the person who is supervising or observing. This may include a social work practitioner, a Contact / Family Time Centre worker, or a care giver.

The supervisor's observations of the contact must be clearly recorded in the child's record and shared with the parents.

Quality of recording

It is important as with any other recording about a child and their family that the person recording adheres to the following principles:

- They must be clear about why they are doing it – the purpose;
- They must be clear about who is going to read it – who is the audience. At a minimum this will be the child and their parent(s) but may also include the Family Court judge and other legal professionals, and other social work practitioners and Team Manager;
- Language should be accessible and able to be read by the child (and grown up child) and their family;
- The recording should be clear and concise;
- The recording should be analytical, not just descriptive;
- If English is not the first language of someone reading the recording, this must be translated into the relevant language for each person;
- A strengths based approach should be adopted rather than merely seeking to record deficits - the recording should provide a balance between what was good and what could have been better;
- The parents are informed that the Contact / Family Time is being recorded;
- The parents have a right to have a copy of the recording as soon as it has been written up. This will enable the parent to know what has been recorded and that there would be no surprises about what has been recorded when the information is presented to Court.

Template for recording

All recording must be carried out on the [Recording Template for Contact / Family Time](#). [Contact Recording Guidance sheets](#) are also available for supervising and record contact with [Infants, Primary school age children and Teenagers](#).

These practice guidance sheets set out what should be recorded during care proceedings and for assessment and for post proceedings and where contact is unsupervised or facilitated. The recording will include:

- How the child was before contact - were there any noticeable behavioural changes, concerns or feelings?
- Whether the contact went as planned, who was involved, timing, place and activities;

- What happened during contact - greetings, farewells, physical contact, behaviours, tasks, conversations, nonverbal communication, feelings, surprises;
- What happened after contact - child's behaviours and feelings;
- Areas of progress and areas of concern.

Who should be included in Family Time?

Sibling Family Time

Different Types of Family Time

Family Time for a Child or Young Person subject to a Care Order

Family Time and Adoption

The Role of the IRO in Care Planning including Family Time