

# Positive Contact

**Top tips for foster carers regarding your role in supporting positive contact for children and young people in your care**

**By**

**Fostering Community Champions in Scotland**

## **Introduction**

This resource aims to answer the question:

### **'How can foster carers help make contact a positive experience for children and young people?'**

The information contained was collated following consultation through our Fostering Community Champions project in Scotland with foster carers, sons and daughters of foster carers, social workers in Scotland and most importantly the young people in care themselves.

Maintaining relationships with all those involved in their lives is important to young people and ensures they are maintaining family identity and have a sense of belonging. Knowing where they have come from and keeping in touch allows young people to stay connected and strengthen their sense of self.

## **What is contact?**

Contact in this context is how the children and young people in your care maintain links with their family or people close to them. Contact should have a clear purpose. Contact can allow social workers time to observe and assess the parenting capacity of parents whilst assessing the long-term plan for the child. In Scotland periods of contact and how this will happen can be recommended by social workers and agreed by the children panel at the Children's Hearing, making it a legal requirement. For foster carers the challenge is making contact work in a positive way for all those involved and, in particular, the children and young people in your care.

**What children and young people have to say when asked 'What makes contact work well?'**

'Going home can be **good**'

'It's **fun**'

'It makes me **happy**'

'Allowing my **mum** to see I'm ok and for me to see she is ok too'

'I like **seeing** my **sisters**'

'I get to see my little **brother**'

'I **love** to see my Mummy'

'I only get to see my Mum once a year'

'**Listen** to what I want'

'Having all the carers involved helping to organise the contact regularly is how contact works well'

'I like **visiting** A..... and R..... (**previous carers**) because I liked them and I can tell them how I am getting on, they are now my friends'

'**You can have more toys**'

## Who – the challenges of creating a balanced life and maintaining links

The list of who children can be maintaining contact with is often lengthy. Contact may be face-to-face but can also include other forms of communication (online, phone, letter box and so on).

- **Parent(s)** – are parents together/ separated, is the person the child refers to as mum or dad their biological parent or someone they see as a mum or dad?
- **Sibling(s)** – while efforts are in place to ensure siblings remain together, this is not always possible. Due to the capacity of the parent(s), the needs of the children or for practical reasons sibling groups may be split, some with other carers, some adopted or some siblings may remain at home with parents.
- **Extended family** – is the child aware of their wider family tree, have they had much involvement with other family members, how well does the child know their extended family and what opportunities have they to get to know them? This can be a key part of forming a positive identity and sense of self.
- **Previous carer(s)** – children moving to a new placement for longer term stability, permanence, adoption or just having to move on may have had a lengthy and positive relationship with their carers. Knowing your history, your ‘back story’ is important to all and efforts should be made to maintain some links. This is a key element of The Fostering Network’s [Keep Connected](#) campaign.
- **Previous foster children and friends they have made** - much is documented about the importance of attachments and yet often children just move and don’t get the opportunity to maintain friendships. Keeping in touch is important if we are going to support a child to develop strong attachments – why should they invest emotionally if they think a relationship will not last?
- **School** - can the child or young person maintain contact or remain in the school they know while in foster care?

### Discussion point:

Think of all the people you have known from childhood and how important they are to your identity. What ways did/do you maintain links with them? How can you do this for the young people in your care?

## What can contact look like?

All contact should be child centred and for the benefit of the child.

Contact can have many variations, here are some examples given to us by foster carers:

- **Supervised contact** – the contact has to be supervised at all times, this can be carried out by social workers, contact supervisors, family workers and foster carers.
- **Unsupervised contact** – this can be varied and allows the young person unsupervised time with family or friends. Restrictions are often placed on where this can take place, with whom and for how long.
- **Sibling contact** – this can be arranged between carers or by social work and has many variations depending on the age and stage of the young people.
- **Contact plan** with a view to the child returning home – this can be a build-up of contact over time which is monitored. The monitoring can be done by a social worker or foster carer.
- **Planned contact** when the young person moves to permanence or long-term care - examples we have range from once per week to four times a year, from face-to-face to letter box only and should be set up to support the young person to be stable and settled in their placement.
- **Prison contact** – managing this to support a young person to maintain contact while their parent is in prison.
- **Adoption contact** – where it is in the best interest of children, foster carers should seek to maintain contact. This is also the case when siblings may have been split and one adopted and another child not. The foster carer may have to advocate for the child to maintain contact with their siblings.
- **Carer contact** – foster carers maintaining contact during respite or times of illness.

### Discussion point:

Carers can play a key role in helping make contact beneficial for the young person in their care – sometimes it is about being creative and going the extra mile to make it work. Case examples: A carer took their young person to Ireland every six months in order to maintain family links, while another felt mother and daughter were struggling and arranged for them to go to a nail bar and enjoy having quality time whilst getting their nails done.

## Supporting children around contact

A key principle is to listen to the child.

‘We challenged this at a looked after child review, evidencing the issues and using child-centred outcomes to show that he was able to cope with higher levels of contact and he should not be disadvantaged due to the issues his siblings were having.’

A carer speaking out and supporting a child having listened to them can make all the difference.

### Before contact – what carers and young people say

- Prepare the child and encourage positive language - they will be anxious and need to know the carer believes it is ok to go to contact.
- If handing child over to the parents take time for a chat - it is good for the child to see their parent and carers interacting positively.
- Foster carers – you need to be mindful of your emotions and stay positive and non-judgemental.
- Encourage child to wear clothes their parents have bought for them.
- Make birth parents welcome and respect their position as the birth parent.

### After contact – what carers and young people say

- Praise the child for managing, enquire as to how people are and show a positive interest.
- Know when to leave the child alone and wait for them to broach the subject, allowing them space and peace to calm down.
- Give the child permission to have enjoyed contact, letting them know it is good to catch up with people and stay in touch.
- Be positive with parents to create positive ending to contact.
- If needed, support the child who may be struggling.

Recognise and understand that young people may be having ongoing contact via social media and mobile phones – an open and honest discussion needs to be had with the child, parents and social worker to implement some safe caring guidelines around this. Foster carers should have some policy around where in the house the young person can have online or phone access. Check with your fostering service what their policy is around the use of social media and mobile phones.

## Top tips for positive contact

- **Support parents and children to create a routine** by establishing a contact plan – children are reassured by routine and certainty. Be creative, send child with activities to do, for example board games, baking ingredients and so on.
- **Choose activities to do together** – siblings who have been split up must maintain contact, it is so important that their bond and relationship is maintained. Choose activities to do together, baking together at one carer's house, visiting play areas, ceramic painting and so on. Try to choose activities that allow the children to interact and enjoy their time together in a natural way.
- **Create opportunities for children to have some 'normal' time** with their parent such as a family meal together even involving the carers, visiting a funfair and so on.
- **Be willing to travel** to contact and transport the child. They often need you following contact to chat on the drive home and provide reassurance.
- **Speak out for the child and your family**, especially if the contact arrangements seem unreasonable in terms of time or distance to travel. Carers need to be honest from the outset and speak up, especially when the contact plan is being devised.
- **Foster carers sometimes need to go above and beyond** - having a truly child centred approach may mean finding ways of maintaining family links.
- **Allow space and time** when a child returns from contact – children can feel guilty about contact with split loyalties, and can feel torn between their carers and parents.
- **Carers looking to maintain contact** beyond the child's placement need to ensure this is about the child and their needs.
- **Where a child moves on to another carer**, work positively with the fostering service and carer(s) to ensure that positive links are maintained which meet the needs of the child.
- **Strive to maintain good working relationships** between foster carer, child's family and social workers – we all need to work together.

## Have a plan B - what to do if contact is cancelled

Contact may not always go as planned and foster carers need to be ready to think on their feet and have a backup plan. Disrupted contact can occur for a number of reasons:

- **Late sudden cancellation** - a foster carer spoke of always being positive about contact for her young person but she was also very aware that mum frequently did not turn up so there was always a “plan B”: ‘I made sure we had either a shopping trip or ice cream treat as my back up plan, something else to do if mum did not show.’ This will not take away the disappointment but will be a good distraction until you are able to talk this over with the child.
- **Family member cancels with notice as they have another appointment** - ensure the reasons for the changes are known to the child. Be honest and aim to use the time to do another activity and ensure the time is filled.
- **Contact stopped, possibly because of sibling misbehaving or child just not coping** - the child will be in a heightened state of anxiety and possibly very distressed as they have not had their ‘full time’. They will be angry at social workers for stopping the contact. Allow the child space, even on the drive home. If the child does not want to talk don’t force it, wait and give them time to think, once settled have a conversation about what happened.
- **Contact distresses the child** - contact time is often part of the legal order for that child therefore it cannot be dropped or easily amended. Carers should keep records of the effect of contact on the child and the behaviours they are displaying in order to evidence the issues around contact.

We hope you have found this a useful resource. We would be keen to hear from foster carers and young people about what works well for you to ensure positive contact. You can email us at [Scotland@fostering.net](mailto:Scotland@fostering.net).

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The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes and transforming children's lives is at the heart of everything we do. We bring together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the best it can be.

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