

Fosterline Wales Factsheet: Contact

Introduction

Most children in foster care will have some degree of relationship with their birth family, even if they do not return home. This factsheet helps you prepare for your vital role in managing contact.

The Fostering Network believes that:

- All looked after children have right to contact with family and friends unless their welfare and safety indicates that this is not possible.
- Foster carers have a responsibility to actively promote and facilitate contact where this is consistent with the child's welfare.
- Fostering services have a responsibility to support foster carers in their work in respect of contact.

Contact

'Contact' describes the contact between a child or young person in your care and their birth family. This includes contact with their siblings.

Contact can take place in a number of ways:

- meetings between the child or young person and family members
- phone calls, including text messages, Facetime and Skype
- emails
- indirect contact: letters and cards, usually delivered via a third party
- digital contact via social media such as Facebook.

Meetings can take place in a variety of venues. A typical example is a family-friendly room chosen by your fostering service. It may be unsupervised or supervised, usually by a staff member. You may be asked to hold contact in your home, for example, when you are caring for a baby, but this will be only if it is deemed safe for everyone.

Making arrangements that please everybody and are in the child's best interests can sometimes be complex and difficult. The arrangements are specified in the placement plan for the child. You must be consulted but it's essential you keep to the agreed arrangements.

The child or young person's wishes and feelings must be considered.

The child's social worker manages and co-ordinates contact arrangements. Your supervising social worker (SSW) can help you deal with problems and negotiate changes but they can't amend

the arrangements without the social worker's permission. The SSW is unable to change the frequency and length of contact, but they might be able to negotiate a change in time or day (for example if contact falls on a birth child's birthday).

You should have a written copy of the contact arrangements, covering:

- frequency
- dates and days
- start and finish times
- venue
- transport arrangements
- a risk assessment:
 - is contact supervised by a worker?
 - is anything prohibited, e.g. the child and parent going out of earshot, subjects of conversation, who takes a young child to the toilet?
 - can everyone go out to, say, the park or must they stay in the designated room?
- any other relevant matter. This can be something positive, such as an activity the child and family like to share or the parent preparing a meal for them all.

Your fostering service should provide financial support for transport and any other costs to do with contact.

Making contact work for the child

You have a pivotal role in making contact a positive experience for the child or young person in your care.

Family time can be conflicting for the child or young person. They might look forward to it and be worried at the same time. Remember that:

- Many children see their parents as who they want them to be - not who they are.
- Contact may remind them of loss.
- They might reject you and identify with their parents, or conversely blame and reject their parents.
- Contact can lead to over-excitement, challenging behaviour, anxiety, sadness or children being unusually quiet.

After contact, follow this advice:

- Make time to be available so they have a comforting, dependable and consistent figure with them.
- If it's practical, take and collect them.
- Be calm, patient and sensitive.
- Understand the feelings beneath their behaviour.
- Remain non-judgemental.
- Record their post-contact reactions and share with your supervising social worker.

Contact can be conflicting for carers too. It's tough to see children upset or unsettled. Forming a working relationship with the birth family is an essential skill, as well as being a requirement of all foster carers. It is hard, especially if the family are unreliable, reject the child or criticise your care.

Feedback from carers suggests:

- Remember, working with the birth family is in the best interests of the child. They will feel more secure if you and their family get on.
- Try not to be judgemental.
- Keep to the contact agreement.
- Be patient.

Keep your records objective and up-to-date – what the child says and does before and after contact is especially valuable.

Be aware of these issues. Your fostering service must offer the right support:

- Talk about them regularly with your supervising social worker.
- Attend training and support groups – other foster carers have the same feelings too.
- Understand what birth relationships mean to a child.
- Be aware of your reactions to the birth family and how the child sees them.
- Allow the child to openly share their feelings about contact with you, what they like, what troubles them, their understandable uncertainties, without being judgemental.

Sibling contact

Contact, between brothers and sisters, is important for these same reasons. Siblings may be living at home or with other foster carers. Sibling relationships may be the longest lasting relationship a person has, and evidence suggests looked after siblings can lose touch with each other if they are separated. Siblings are significant for each child's identity, sense of shared history, validation of shared experience and feelings of belonging.

Arrangements should be made for siblings to have contact. Again these will be specified in the placement plan.

How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up to date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

Advice

Fosterline Wales

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday. If you call outside this time please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us or write to us at:

Fosterlinewales@fostering.net

The Fostering Network Wales

1 Caspian Point, Pierhead Street

Cardiff Bay CF10 4DQ

Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. You can login to share your experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters. thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs. For more

information, contact our learning and development manager, Sarah Mobedji at sarah.mobedji@fostering.net.

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

Contact us

To find out more about our work in Wales, please contact:

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