

# GUIDE TO DEVELOPING CONTACT ARRANGEMENTS

This guide is a tool to assist child protection workers when developing contact arrangements for children in care and their family and should be read alongside the Department's Permanency Planning Policy and Chapter 10.1: Permanency Planning, in the Casework Practice Manual.

Contact arrangements should be made in the context of the existing protection order and must distinguish clearly between contact aimed at reunification with parent/s, and contact that supports the child's significant relationships when there is a long-term protection order in place.

For a child placed in out-of-home care, maintenance of the relationship with their parent/s is critical, especially when there are plans for reunification. Quality contact can increase the likelihood of successful reunification, reduce time in out-of-home care, promote healthy attachment, and reduce the negative effects of separation of the child from their family.

It is also important that children, and particularly infants, are provided the opportunity to settle into a stable and predictable environment with a carer who is highly attuned to their needs in order to repair the negative effects of disrupted relationships already experienced.

The Department is committed to purposeful contact that is focused on quality, rather than high-frequency contact which can prevent a child establishing important routines, stability and attachments. Quality contact for children means reducing the number of strangers involved, supporting parents during visits, providing suitable visiting environments and reducing the child's travel time.

Decisions about the frequency and duration of contact arrangements should take into consideration the following factors:



**DEVELOPING CONTACT ARRANGEMENTS ACCORDING TO THE CASE PLAN GOAL**

<b>Age of Child</b>	<b>Developmental Stage of the Child</b>	<b>Reunification is the Goal of the Case Plan</b>	<b>Long-term out-of-home care (until 18 or Special Guardianship) is the Goal of the Case Plan</b>
<b>Zero to six months</b>	<p>Babies of this age generally accept care from any carer and use a number of signals, including crying and smiling, to bring and keep carer close to them.</p> <p>Babies below the age of six months have sensory memories of their primary carer (such as smell, touch, sound of voice) but they do not have a sustained memory of that carer. Babies of this age begin to recognise their parents and other carers and prefer interactions with them. They still do not understand that their caregivers can continue to exist when they are not present.</p> <p>Maintenance of an infant's relationships with their mother and/or father is critical, especially when there are plans for reunification. However, it is important that babies are provided the opportunity to settle into a stable and predictive environment with their carer in order to improve the negative effects of disrupted relationships already experienced.</p>	<p>Because babies at this age have very basic memories and cognitive processes, they do not have an image of their primary carer in their absence. As a result, parents quickly become strangers to their babies if regular contact and direct care of the child are not possible.</p> <p>Babies in this age group will not generally protest separations from their parents however, it is important that the parent have contact involving hands-on care of the child. In this way the parent becomes associated with responsiveness to the child's needs, maintaining attachment, and/or preparing the way for the process of attachment and bonding. Research supports longer duration of contact that allows parents to have some responsibility for the child's care needs, over high frequency contact that can be disruptive to the child's important routines.</p>	<p>Contact is still important, although frequent, hands-on type of contact is less critical. The infant's greatest need at this stage is for a positively responsive and reliable primary carer.</p> <p>The purpose of contact at this age may be to assist with the bonding of the parent to the child in order to maintain the relationship as a way to provide a basis for future, more meaningful contact as the child gets older.</p>
<b>Six months up to two years</b>	<p><b><u>This is the primary attachment phase.</u></b></p> <p>Children in this age group will seek out their main carer to whom they are developing an attachment. They want to be near them and interact with them in preference to others.</p> <p>Babies of six to seven months of age start to protest when separated from their primary attachment figures. They react warily to strangers, and start to recognise in a basic way that their main carers still exist even when they cannot see them. This skill develops until the</p>	<p>Babies and toddlers need regular interaction with their "attachment figures" in order to foster, maintain and strengthen their relationships.</p> <p>Extended separations from either parent with whom the child has formed a meaningful attachment are not recommended because they can negatively affect the development of the attachment relationship.</p> <p>Frequent contact with a parent, involving hands-on care is most important – particularly where the child has already developed an attachment</p>	<p>In the early stages of attachment development, the purpose of contact may be to assist with the bonding of the parent to the child in order to maintain the relationship as a way to provide a basis for future, more meaningful contact as the child gets older.</p> <p>If a positive relationship between the child and parents is possible, regular contact will enable the child to retain some memory of a parent who is</p>

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	<p>age of two years which enables the child to gradually tolerate longer separations from their carers.</p> <p>Babies 12-15 months of age can maintain images of their parents for short periods of time, however, they are unable to „refresh“ their memories without regular contact.</p>	<p>to a carer. Where such an attachment exists, any transition back to a parent in this period needs to be carefully handled to enable the child and parent to gradually build a trusting relationship. The support that a carer can provide to the parent and child during this period can be invaluable.</p>	<p>absent.</p>
<p><b>Two to four years</b></p>	<p>Toddlers of this age are developing increased cognitive and language abilities which helps them to tolerate longer separations from parents.</p> <p>They continue to have a very limited sense of time, however, and they are generally not able to conceptualise beyond today and tomorrow.</p>	<p>Toddlers of this age can draw on internalised images of parents to assist them to maintain relationships with their parents. These children can also communicate meaningfully with parents (although in a limited fashion).</p> <p>Where reunification is planned within a few months, contact should be of moderate frequency yet balanced, to avoid interrupting routines and activities.</p>	<p>Contact between a child and parents at this age can be problematic. A range of factors can impact on contact including: the attitude and circumstances of the parents; the relationship the child had with the parents prior to removal; and the extent to which the child is settled in long-term out-of-home care.</p>
<p><b>Five to eleven years</b></p>	<p>Children at this age can begin to voice their needs and wishes and often contact arrangements change as children grow older and become more independent and vocal about their own wishes.</p> <p>They may also feel confused about loyalty to family and display resistance to carers.</p> <p>However, relationships with parents continue to play a crucial role in shaping children’s social, emotional, personal and cognitive development.</p> <p>Young people at this age who are unable to have contact with their parents may develop an unrealistic image of their parents which could damage their self-esteem and ability to relate to others and increase the risk of depression for</p>	<p>Contact for children at this age can be difficult to arrange given the child’s schooling, homework and out of school activities as well as other events which happen in a child’s life at this time.</p> <p>Consideration needs to be given to children maintaining these important routines and arranging contact to occur during some of these activities should be explored.</p> <p>Face-to-face contact may be supported with other forms of contact such as phone calls, the exchange of letters and photographs, or videos.</p>	<p>Arrangements for contact can be modified as children reach school age and can cope with longer separations from parents.</p> <p>Older children in long-term out-of-home care may have divided loyalties between their foster carers and their families. Contact is the point at which the two families overlap in the child’s life and mind and is therefore a complex area.</p> <p>Contact can include face to face visits, phone calls, exchange of photographs, or videos. Positive contact with parents could be increased.</p>

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<b>Twelve to eighteen years</b>	<p>This is when young people generally begin to express strong views about where they live and who they are loyal to. Assumptions should not be made that young people of this age will be loyal to their parents nor that they are content in foster care.</p> <p>Identity issues become more important at this age. Older children may wish to reconnect with parent/s, family and significant others. Additionally risk issues may be different (e.g., no longer at risk of neglect).</p> <p>Adolescents in care need a sense of family membership and family availability to help them to establish a secure base.</p> <p>Case managers may need to assist in cases where a child wishes to have increased contact with parents especially where the child has been in care for some time and has had minimal contact with their parents.</p> <p>Young people at this age who are unable to have contact with their parents may develop an unrealistic image of their parents which could damage their self-esteem and ability to relate to others and increase the risk of depression for the child.</p>	<p>Contact should be closely negotiated with the young person at this age and often contact can be negotiated between the young person and their parents from about the age of 15.</p> <p>Consideration needs to be given to the young person's schooling, homework and out of school activities and non-face-to-face contact may be used to support face-to-face contact.</p> <p>The frequency of contact for this age group should be negotiated closely with the young person.</p>	<p>Contact for young people in long-term out-of-home care or on special guardianship at this age can often be arranged between the young person and their parent/s. If there are issues around the parent/s behaviours during contact – these can be worked through with the young person.</p> <p>Older children may have divided loyalties between their foster carers and their families. Contact is the point at which the two families overlap in the child's life and mind and is therefore a complex area.</p> <p>Contact can include face to face visits, phone calls, exchange of photographs, or videos. Positive contact with parents could be increased.</p>