***2 December 2016***

## Connections and Contact for Children In Care

The single factor most connected with positive outcomes for children is meaningful, lifelong connections with family, kin and community. Loneliness can have a devastating impact on a person's emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing. A meaningful connection to family, kin and community helps a child or young person develop a sense of belonging and hope.

Creating and keeping relationships and emotional permanence for a child or young person, through informal and formal types of contact, plays an important role in:

* easing the pain of separation and loss for a child or young person, their family and significant others
* reducing the child or young person's sense of abandonment
* reassuring the child or young person of their family's wellbeing
* promoting cultural and spiritual identity
* supporting restoration by maintaining relationships.

## Identifying important people and making decisions

### Making decisions about contact

### As part of case planning, search for and make contact with people who are, or may be, important to the child or young person. Do this by talking with the child or young person, their immediate and extended family, community, current and previous carers, teachers and any other relevant people.

### Deciding the type, level and frequency of contact

Decisions about the type, level and frequency of contact should reflect the case-plan goal, be in the best interests of the child and not place them at further risk of harm.

Explore both formal and informal types of contact. Also recognise the modes of communication that suit the child and best support natural connections.

We have to understand, accept and embrace the fact children and young people's modes of communication are rapidly expanding and social media is their norm. Informal contact methods should always been considered including internet video call, phone calls, letters and email.

### Contact decisions that differ to a Child’s wishes

If a contact decision is made that is different to what the child or young person wishes, explain the reason for this decision to them and record.

### Contact Orders

If there are contact orders in place, the arrangements need to be carried out. If there are concerns that the contact is not in the child's best interest, an application must be made to the Children's Court to vary or rescind the order(s). The Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR) provided through Legal Aid may assist children and young people in OOHC to resolve contact disputes.

Email the completed [request for mediation form](http://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/what-we-do/family-law/care-and-protection-services/contact-mediations) and supporting documents to Legal Aid at ADR@legalaid.nsw.gov.au. Record the referral and create an alternative dispute resolution record.

### Keeping connections with siblings

If a child or young person has been placed apart from their siblings, support their relationship by arranging regular contact, unless:

* a Children's Court has ordered that no contact should occur
* the child or young person's safety may be at risk during contact and supervision would not manage this risk or
* a child or young person aged over 12 years old has said that they do not want to have face to face contact with their siblings. Consider what other options for contact could be appropriate.

### Promoting connections between brothers and sisters

Sibling relationships are promoted by:

* asking siblings about the type and frequency of contact they would like to have with each other
* giving a child or young person and their carer their siblings name, birth date, address and phone number and giving the same information to their siblings who remain at home (if safe to do so)
* telling the child or young person if a sibling has moved to another placement
* arranging siblings to attend the same school (where possible)
* arranging siblings to engage in cultural and spiritual activities together
* arranging siblings to participate in sporting or other events together
* asking the carer to assist the child with writing, emailing and phoning their siblings as often as they wish
* arranging joint life story work (where possible).

## Arranging and preparing for contact visits

### Contact Venues

Contact visits are to be held in an environment that is safe, comfortable and relaxed without too many distractions. Involve the people having contact in decisions about the venue.

### Participation of carers in contact visits

Foster, relative or kinship carers may participate in contact arrangements, if the carer agrees to their proposed role and it is in the child or young person's best interests.

Record the carer's involvement in contact and agreed arrangements in the child or young person's case plan.

### Supervised contact

Assess and decide if a contact visit needs to be supervised.

To support a decision about the need for casework supervision of contact visits, consider if:

* The child or young person or their family requests that a caseworker be present
* There are concerns that the child or young people may be emotionally or physically harmed during contact
* There are concerns that the child or young person may be abducted
* Another professional working with the chid or young person or family recommends that contact be supervised
* Emotional pressure aimed at making the child or young person retract a disclosure is likely to be applied during contact
* The family continues to deny or acknowledge the abuse or neglect that led to the child or young persons removal and the child is likely to be exposed to, or harmed by, this during contact.

### Contact Workers

Provide the worker supervising contact with a clear outline of the purpose of the visit.

### Contact at Correctional Centres

If a child or young person is having a contact visit with a person in a correctional centre, contact the correctional centre seven days in advance to make the booking. The centre will advise what identification or other documents the caseworker or other person supporting the child or young person needs to bring to show centre staff.

Corrective Services NSW provides a number of services for families of offenders in custody to facilitate contact and maintain relationships. Contact with parents or other family members in correctional centres may include face-to-face and non-contact visits, video visits, phone calls and letters.

Corrective Services screens some inmates for their potential risk to children because of the nature of their offence or other issues. In these cases, visits with children are assessed by Corrective Services to ensure their safety.

## Monitoring Contact Arrangements

Monitor the effectiveness of contact arrangements. This may include observations made by the person supervising contact and talking to the child or young person, their family and their carer.

Review and decide if the arrangements need to change if issues that may affect the child or young person's safety or wellbeing change. Discuss these decisions and the rationale for them with all relevant people and record.

If there are significant concerns for a child or young person's safety and a contact order exists, an application can be made to vary or rescind the order.