

## **VICTORIA CHILDREN & FAMILY CENTRE**

### **OPERATING GUIDANCE FOR CONTACT/FAMILY TIME**

#### **1. Introduction**

Bury Council is committed to promoting positive family time between parents and their children who are in care; this service may also be extended to other close family members connected to the child, where this is agreed by the social worker and in line with the child's care plan.

Family time sessions are facilitated by family support workers who provide full or moderate supervision as required and also observe and record the relationship between the people attending.

The purpose of family time is to afford the child and family member the opportunity to maintain or build a relationship. There is also an expectation that the parent will be supported to improve their parenting capacity and be provided with opportunities that allow them to demonstrate their skills.

The service aims to achieve good quality family time that is rewarding and enjoyable for both the parent and child, by working collaboratively with families we aim to strengthen parenting capacity.

#### Current research states

*'The frequency of contact should be at a level that does not interfere with the infant's needs for consistent physical and emotional care in the foster home and to form a relationship with the carer. This must include sufficient recovery time for stressful situations.'*<sup>1</sup>

*'A focus of quality rather than quantity is needed. In particular, the disruption to an infants' secure base in their attachment relationship with their foster carer needs to be minimised to ensure a sense of safety, support and predictable routine.'*<sup>2</sup>

*'Contact between babies and their parents should be minimal in the early months to enable the baby to develop secure attachment behaviours with their carers...if the assessment concludes that the baby can return to the care of the parent, the baby is able to transfer healthy, established attachment patterns to their parent. This makes rehabilitation more likely to succeed than if the baby has disrupted or disorganised attachment patterns caused by excessive contact.'*

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#### References

<sup>1</sup> 'Contact for Infants subject to Care Proceedings', Family Law June 2011 (**Gillian Schofield and John Simmonds**)

<sup>2</sup> 'Baby on Board', Executive Summary: Report of the Infants in Care and Family Contact Research Project 2009 (**Cathy Humphreys, Meredith Kiraly**)

<sup>3</sup> 'Concurrent Planning', Adoption & Fostering 2009 Volume 33 pp5-18 (**Julie Kenrick**)

Our primary focus when planning family time is always the welfare of the child.

This should be considered carefully when planning family time for all children and in particular infants, to minimise disruption to their routines

## **2. Operating Principles**

- The child's welfare will underpin all decisions ensuring that the best interest of the child is the primary focus when planning family time.
- The central purpose of family time is to facilitate the care plan of the child.
- The level of family time will be determined by what is in the child's best interests and the needs of the care plan.
- Before the family time arrangements are written into a care plan, they should be discussed with the manager of the Contact Service.
- In order to progress the care plan, the allocated family support worker will work with the family to support and help them understand their part as a parent/carer in their child's care plan.
- Regular feedback will be given to parents and the child's social worker. A formal feedback meeting will be undertaken 4-6 weeks after the first visit and at the same intervals thereafter.
- Of necessity, priority will be given to family time for parents/carers or other family members who are part of the assessment process, and who in general, require close supervision, observation and assessment.

## **3. Family Time Agreement**

A properly completed Family Time Agreement underpins successful family time arrangements.

An agreement pro-forma is provided by the Family Centre. It provides a guide for parents, family support workers and social workers about how the family time sessions will be conducted and what is expected of each person.

Social workers must complete the initial agreement with the Family Centre manager and the family prior to the first visit taking place. It must be signed by the social worker and family.

Arrangements for the supervision of visits are to be covered in the agreement.

Within the agreement social worker's specify arrangements for the visits i.e. who is to attend, whether they are allowed out in community etc. This is clearly explained to the parents at the time of completion. The centre then uses this and information from the referral to complete a risk assessment prior to visits commencing.

If an interpreter is required the social worker must inform the Family Centre manager so this can be booked in advance.

### Level of Supervision

Clear reasons need to be specified for the level of supervision required by the social workers.

The degree of closeness of supervision varies greatly and must therefore be specified in the Family Time referral and explained to parents.

Arrangements for the supervision of Family Time are to be covered in the agreement.

Levels are:

- A) Supervised Family Time - worker remains in sight and sound of children, young person at all times. Precise notes are taken to inform reports for legal proceedings.
- B) Facilitated Family Time - worker does not need to remain in sight and sound of children, young person all the time, but is present to ensure the visit runs as smoothly as possible and produces the best outcomes for the children. Settles the family in and then checks on the situation at a minimum of every 15 minutes. Shorter notes will be taken.
- C) Supported Family Time - worker spends time greeting the family and settling them in. Ensuring the end of the visit goes smoothly. Very brief notes taken on who attended and how they presented.

It is expected that the social worker supervises one visit per month when weekly visits are provided, and the child is subject to care proceedings.

The levels of supervision will be regularly reviewed with the social worker and at the Child's Looked After Review.

### Transport

There is an expectation that foster carers undertake the transporting of children for family time wherever possible.

Where difficulties arise for Bury foster carers negotiations will take place with the centre and the fostering team to provide a solution.

Transport is not provided for IFA carers.

Every effort will be made to ensure continuity of staff when transporting children to and from the Family Centre to develop supportive relationships that provide reassurance to children.

#### **4. Promoting Positive Family Time**

##### Communication

Good communication is the key to promoting positive family time and everyone should be encouraged to feel that they should share information.

Parents and foster carers will be given contact details and also given a timetable of the days, times, venue and name of the family support worker for their visits.

The social worker should inform the family support worker of any significant events that might upset the smooth running of a session or alter the risk assessment. The social worker should also inform them of practical changes e.g. placement, telephone numbers, legal status. The social worker should use the Family Time Update form.

Parents and carers should also be encouraged to share information.

Parents will be supported to communicate their views using interpreters where required, for example; during family time visits, and the initial agreement and feedback meetings.

The centre must be informed in advance if any additional people will be attending a visit. If parents arrive with unknown persons and there has been no prior notification from the social worker, they will not be permitted to attend the session and will be asked to leave the centre.

If a professional is to attend from an outside agency e.g. DNA testing or Children's Guardians, the family support worker should be notified. The person's contact details should be provided so that if a visit is cancelled the professional can be notified not to attend.

#### **5. Family Time Visits**

At the outset, emphasis is placed primarily on the quality and not quantity of contact. Therefore, initially one-hour sessions will be offered to assess the commitment, reliability and value that the parents afford to their visits with a view to increasing if the outcomes for the child/ren are positive.

When rehabilitation is the plan, visits will be increased to promote the parent / child relationship. Family support workers will work with the family both at the centre and in their home; this may involve the parents being supported to learn practical skills as well as developing their capacity to attune themselves to their child's emotional needs.

It is requested that mobile phones be turned off during family time so that parents can focus on the child throughout the visit. If parents need to be contacted during this time, they may give the centre number.

A range of activities that encourage parent/child interaction through play are offered at each visit, these include painting, craft activities, games, baking etc as well as physical games. These activities will be discussed and agreed in advance of the next visit.

Parents are encouraged to bring refreshments for children who are attending after school. Parents of babies and toddlers will be encouraged to feed and change them, and the carer will be asked to provide relevant bottles, food, nappies, and clothing.

The same days and times will be given to families to provide continuity for children, the centre will also endeavor to space out visits to provide rest days in between.

Where commitment to attending family time is not consistent, arrangements will be put in place to arrive early for a visit, to avoid children being brought to the centre unnecessarily, thus minimising emotional distress.

The child's welfare and wellbeing will underpin all decisions about family time and should issues of the child's safety and well-being arise during the visit it will stopped, and the social worker informed. If there are continuing concerns that affect the child or worker's safety, family time would be suspended, and a meeting held in an attempt to resolve issues.

Time spent away from the primary caregiver (in most cases the foster carer) will be stressful for very young babies in the first few weeks of life. Long periods away from the primary caregiver where the infant is observed to be stressed and presenting as watchful or vigilant are likely to be harmful. Foster carers will be encouraged to attend alongside the family support worker to reassure a young baby and support parents to interact in a way the baby likes. This can take place whilst the baby becomes familiar with family members and the venue.

Sibling visits are not catered for by the family centre. It is expected that the foster carers or other family members facilitate these.

## **6. Rearranging Family Time**

Every effort will be made to provide family time that is supervised by a consistent member of staff. When this is not possible a colleague from the family centre who is familiar to the family will usually step in to cover the session, but on rare and unavoidable occasions the social worker may be contacted to make other arrangements or to agree that the visit is cancelled.

Any visits that fall on a bank holiday will not be rearranged unless they occur only once per week and that day is the bank holiday. In this case every effort will be made to rearrange the visit

Due to time and demand at Christmas time, families will be offered only one extended session in the week preceding Christmas, so that all families get a fair allocation of time.

It is not practical for the service to provide alternative visits when they are lost because of: -

- attending court - unless they only have 1 session per week (if court is cancelled 24 hours' notice needs to be given for us to reinstate the contact)
- cancellation or non-attendance of contact by parents
- cancellation due to child's / parent's illness
- children are on holiday with their foster families

All cases will be monitored by the family centre; the plan will be reviewed after one month with a view to maintaining the current level of family time or proposing an increase, decrease or suspension as appropriate.

All proposed alterations to family time arrangements by the social worker e.g. times, dates, level of supervision; frequency etc must be discussed and agreed with the Family Centre manager to assess their viability.

A Family Time Update form should be completed and e-mailed to the managers before the changes can take place.

Parents who ask for their visits together after they have been having separate ones, will be given the visits that have been held by one parent. Likewise, parents who separate after their visits begin will share the original allocated sessions.

## **7. Safeguarding**

Due to the high volume of children and adults visiting the centre families are not permitted to use their own video cameras, cameras, or mobile phones. The centre will ensure that photographs are taken during the visits and then forwarded to parents. Photographs are given to parents on the strict understanding that they are not posted on any social media websites.

Parents and visiting adults are expected to arrive on time for their visits. They must not be under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

If there are concerns about parental lifestyle and the use of alcohol or drugs, then parents will be assessed on arrival, to ensure they have capacity and are capable of having family time with their child/ren.

If adults do not arrive within 15 minutes of the starting time and have not notified the centre of a reason why they will be late, then the child/ren will leave with their carer.

If the weather is inclement, efforts will be made to keep visits running smoothly wherever possible. If, however, the roads become too treacherous due to ice and snow and it is felt that there is a significant risk in transporting children to the centre, the visit will be cancelled. Unfortunately, in these circumstances it is not possible to arrange an alternative, compensatory visit.

## **8. Assessments**

The family support worker may be asked to provide observations that form part of the social worker's overall assessment. It is important that the social worker is specific about the areas of parenting capacity that they require the family support worker to focus on, so that the right tasks can be set.

Tasks may be practical and usually completed in the Family Centre or surrounding area – e.g. shops, park or parents may also be asked to 'research' certain information e.g. what time a clinic is available or to complete some reading, which they will then discuss with the worker. Adults may also be attending parenting classes and the family support worker might be asked to comment on their capacity to put learning into practice.

Where independent assessments have taken place, such as PAMS, and there are learning recommendations, a meeting will be arranged with the social worker and family support worker to develop a plan of learning goals to support parents.

Assessments that are carried out during supervised visits cannot be classed as Parenting Assessments because of the artificial nature of the setting and the limited time available, but they can provide valuable information and observations that can form part of a wider assessment.

Assessment will be made of the following:

- Punctuality
- Commitment
- Emotional Warmth
- Stimulation
- Communication
- Meeting basic care needs
- Guidance and Boundaries
- Safety – being aware of potential hazards etc.
- Capacity to take and implement advice and suggestions

The above areas of parenting capacity are covered within our supervised family time visits and are derived from the Assessment Framework.

Judgements about a parent's commitment to a child cannot easily be made from visits. Many variables apply, and a failure to keep family time arrangements may indicate confusion and anxiety on the part of parents, reflecting, not lack of commitment but a need for support.

## **9. Recording**

Only factual information based on the observations of the family support worker is recorded.

A chronology of attendance will be recorded and shared with relevant professionals.

All supervised visits will be recorded on Observation Sheets and entered onto the LCS database; social workers will be able to access these through the child's case file.

Observation Sheets will be distributed to parents before each feedback meeting to allow time for them to be read.

Unsupervised and loosely supervised visits will be recorded on case notes and the chronology sheet.

The summaries written on the Observation Sheet will be used to compile a statement for court if requested.

Parents can have access to information recorded by the family support worker. This access will be by arrangement and outside of the visit.

Requests for observation sheets or court reports must be at least two weeks prior to the due date.

## **10. Feedback**

Verbal feedback will be given to parents as and when required, either during or after each family time session. Formal written feedback will be given after the first 4-6 weeks depending on the level of frequency, it will then be held at the same intervals thereafter. It is good practice for social workers to attend these meetings, which focus what aspects of parenting are working well, any areas we are worried about, and where they may require further support and guidance. The aim of the feedback session is to work collaboratively with families to strengthen parenting capacity. There is a section for families to add their own comments and together with their family support worker will set goals to work towards.

A copy of the feedback sheet will be uploaded onto LCS database as an attached document, after the meeting has taken place.



## **11. Family Time after Proceedings**

Discussions regarding future contact must be undertaken with the Family Centre manager before being written in the child's care plan.

Once proceedings for the child/ren have concluded, the social worker should inform the Family Centre manager of the proposed reduction plan prior to adoption, or of the long-term contact arrangements for children who will remain in care. All plans are then shared with family members and carers via letter.

All long-term contact visits are co-ordinated through one dedicated worker.

Whilst efforts are made to accommodate requests it cannot be guaranteed that contacts will be planned for birthdays and other occasions. Because of the high volume of contact, it is not always possible to change dates that have been allocated. Where a suitable date cannot be facilitated, it may be necessary to refer the family back to the allocated Social Worker to make other arrangements.

Community visits that are to take place away from the centre can only do so if pre-arranged with the social worker.

## **12. Special Guardianship/Child Arrangement Orders**

The Centre will aim to support the placement for a limited period of 3 months for families to work together to provide positive family time visits for the child/ren

## **13. Adoption**

To support the family effectively, goodbye visits are facilitated within the centre and not in the community. As this is a very difficult time emotionally for families it is requested that only members of the family who have played a significant part in the child's life attend. Other professionals or advocates may attend to support the family.

## **14. Saturdays**

The centre is open on Saturday between 9:15 am and 4:00pm. As this is a limited resource occasionally demand may outstrip capacity. In this instance a waiting list will be maintained, and the Service will endeavour to provide a session as soon as possible. In order to facilitate as many visits as possible, a maximum of one hour will be offered. Family support workers are not able to transport children on Saturday. Priority is given to working parents or those children that are in placements located a long distance away.

## **15. Virtual Family Time**

Face to face visits are generally the best way of maintaining relationships but other ways, such as video calls and phone calls are another method that can be used to connect children with their families, and can be used when direct visits are unable to take place. This may be due to illness or other unforeseen circumstances. A variety of media platforms can be used such as Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, skype etc The duration will depend on the age of the child and their ability to engage meaningfully via this method, this can range from 10 minutes to 30 minutes. Both direct and indirect contact will be discussed at the initial agreement meeting and clear arrangements will be detailed within the agreement.