

# **FAMILY TIME /CONTACT ARRANGEMENTS FOR INFANTS: A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The period from conception to a child's 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday is vital in development of healthy brain circuits, relationships and stress responses. For infants who are looked after their experience of contact with their parents and carers is a crucial component of this important period of early life and will play a major part in long term outcomes

## **EARLY DEVELOPMENT**

Babies find out how relationships work from their experience of being cared for. They learn how to regulate their emotions and cope with stress by the way they are comforted and reassured by their caregivers when they are upset or anxious. They are predisposed to engage in social interactions from birth and the nature of these interactions will determine the way their brains develop and the security or otherwise of their attachment relationships. An infant who consistently receives sensitive, responsive and attuned care will develop of brain 'hard wired' with positive and healthy circuits, a blueprint for happy nurturing relationships, and a positive self-esteem.

## **STRESS AND CORTISOL**

Babies get stressed! In fact, babies can be stressed even before they are born. Where mothers-to-be experience high levels of stress through pregnancy the cortisol (stress hormone) they produce will pass through the placenta to compromise the development of their baby's brain and prevent the early development of healthy stress responses. These babies will find it harder to cope with challenging and stressful situations after they are born. They are likely to be harder to care for than babies who haven't been stressed in utero. They may be 'jittery', tense, watchful and vigilant.

In many cases these babies will find their mother presence stressful for them; their mother's smell and the sound of her voice may cause a triggering of their stress response from association with the stress they experienced before birth; where this happens it will further traumatise them.

Babies who are chronically stressed and thus produce high levels of cortisol, will not be able to make good developmental progress, and may experience feeding and growth difficulties, sleep problems and poor emotional and behavioural regulation. Babies who have high levels of cortisol are unable to produce oxytocin, the hormone that makes them feel safe, secure and contributes to positive self-esteem.

## **QUALITY OF THE FAMILY TIME / CONTACT EXPERIENCE**

It is important for infants that contact time with their parents and other family members is as positive and beneficial as possible; it is not acceptable that infants experience contact family time as frightening or acutely distressing. For young babies the very fact of being away from their primary caregiver (the foster carer) will be challenging and stressful for them. In order to optimise the likelihood of contact time being a positive experience babies need to experience contact as a safe, predictable and comfortable situation and their family caregivers as sensitive and responsive to their needs. The foster carer can play an important role in facilitating this by providing good quality information about what routines and strategies are helpful to the infant to support them and help

them to remain calm or to comfort them when they become distressed. In some cases it may be appropriate for the foster carer to be present in the room for all or part of the session to reassure the baby; if the foster carer is not present and the infant is struggling with time away from the foster carer it may be helpful to the baby to have an item that belongs to (and smells of) the foster carer and foster home with them in the session. In addition the following factors can be hugely helpful in supporting an infant in coping well with contact time:

- The same time and day(s) each week (with 'rest ' days in between wherever possible)
- The same room and venue each time
- A consistent supervisor at each contact
- The primary caregiver (foster carer) to transport the infant to each contact and be there to meet them and transport them back from each contact.

## **SUPERVISING FAMILY TIME /CONTACT**

The contact supervisor will play an important role in supporting an infant during contact time. A familiar supervisor can be a reassuring and emotionally containing presence who can help the infant to feel safer and less anxious during contact. A predictable routine for handovers at the start and end of the contact session will help with this. It is helpful if the supervisor can develop a relationship with family members attending contact and support them in ensuring the best quality contact time possible. Occasionally it may be necessary to intervene with clear guidance to family members about unacceptable behaviour and language, or even to stop the contact session if the baby is exposed to violence or aggression or if the infant is acutely distressed for a period of time (15 minutes) during the contact session.

Positive contact with parents and other family members can be enjoyable and beneficial for babies when the contact sessions are planned and managed well and are predictable, consistent and of good quality for the babies concerned. Sadly, in some cases contact can be stressful, anxiety-provoking and even frightening for babies' where this is the case the experience of contact can cause emotional harm and compromise healthy social development.

Ensuring the best positive contact experiences will contribute to more positive outcomes for babies looked after in North Yorkshire.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This guidance is adapted, with kind permission, from the document 'CONTACT ARRANGEMENTS FOR INFANTS: A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS' written by Sue Ranger, Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Team Manager at the Leeds Infant Mental Health Service ( updated in 2017 )

## **REFERENCES**

[www.1001criticaldays.co.uk](http://www.1001criticaldays.co.uk)

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