

Family Time Guidance

The Local Authority has a duty, under section 34 of the Children Act 1989, to promote Family Time. Section 34 places a duty on the Local Authority to allow a child in its care (regardless of whether there are court proceedings or whether an order is in place), reasonable time with their parents and 'other persons' prescribed within s34 (1) of the act. The duties and responsibilities of the Local Authority are set out in [Children Act 1989: Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review 2010](#). In addition [Regulation 14 of the Fostering Services Regulations](#) places a duty on fostering services to promote Family Time between a child placed with a foster parent and his/her parents, relatives and friends unless such is not reasonably practicable or consistent with the child's welfare. In these circumstance, the Local Authority can only suspend contact for children who are subject to an interim or full Care Order, for a limited period (up to a maximum of 7 days).

Alongside our legal obligations, we know from research and our communication with looked after children and young people, that Family Time is a key priority for them, and understandably so. When, how and who they spend time with has a significant impact on a child/young person's emotional wellbeing, their sense of identity and stability and their ability to develop into adults who understand their experiences and their place within different family networks.

Planning for Family Time however requires thought and consideration. This should start prior to the child or young person becoming accommodated and needs to be regularly reviewed in order to ensure that Family Time is a positive and meaningful experience that meets their developing needs. Just as every child and young person is an individual, so will be their experiences and wishes and feelings in regard to Family Time and these are likely to change over time.

Family Time also involves the balancing of needs which include the child or young persons need to be and feel safe while maintaining relationships with family members. These complexities are only heightened due to the needs of the adults in the family and the way in which they manage their relationships with children who have been removed from their care. When considering appropriate Family Time opportunities, we need to remain mindful of the following:

- The priority needs to be on child focussed, high quality Family Time.
- Children and young people should be asked about who they would like to see and should also be invited to tell us if they do not wish to see certain members of their family.

- We need to recognise the significance of not only siblings, but grandparents and wider family members as well as friends; looking beyond the immediate family reminds us that for many children and young people who are looked after, their extended family and friends are a potential support for them as they progress into adulthood.
- When considering “when?” thought needs to be given to key dates such as the child or young person’s birthday and that of their relatives, Mothers/Father’s Day, and dates of any significant losses. Family Time on these days can be both positive and negative depending on the child or young person.
- We need to remain focused on the purpose of Family Time; a higher frequency of Family Time may be appropriate during proceedings while assessments are on-going and while decisions about permanence are yet to be made. However, in instances whereby a child or young person will not be returning to the care of their parent/s, the purpose of Family Time should become focused on the maintenance of key relationships and supporting the child to understand their life journey, while also enabling them to fully settle within their long-term placement. It is important that the child/young person’s Family Time plan is reflective of the child/young person’s Care Plan.
- Family Time arrangements need to be regularly reviewed to ensure that they continue to be reflective of the child or young person’s needs and the child’s view should be central to this.

What we offer

We currently provide Family Time opportunities for children and young people who are looked-after and in some circumstance, children who are subject to pre-proceedings at our three resource centres across Wiltshire; Melbourne House in Devizes, Salisbury Resource Centre, and Trowbridge Resource Centre.

The centres are open from 08:45 – 17:20 Monday to Thursday and 08:45 – 16:20 on a Friday. In acknowledgement that some parents may be unable to attend Family Time during the core hours, we would strive to ensure that Family Time can be as flexible as possible, including arranging sessions beyond core hours and/or away from the centres.

Referrals for Family Time are made via Liquid Logic as per the guidance below. The Safeguarding Social Worker is asked to include within this referral key information such as how frequently Family Time should take place, who should be present and details of any specific support that the parent, child, or young person may require.



Contact and
Assessment service re

Once received, the referral will be reviewed by the Senior Family Time Worker. The worker may contact the Social Worker to ascertain some supplementary information about the family in order to ensure that the arrangements are reflective of everyone's needs. They will also contact the foster carer and parent/s in order to coordinate suitable Family Time sessions, considering:

- The location of the child/young person's placement (in order to minimise travel time);
- School/Nursery hours;
- The employment commitments of the parent/s;
- Any commitments that the foster carer may have.
- The need for a parent/s to travel via public transport to attend Family Time;

In some circumstance, whereby there are additional risk factors, for example risk of aggression towards staff, a Risk Assessment will be completed by the Assistant Team Manager/Team Manager in collaboration with the Social Worker. This assessment will help to ensure the safety of everyone using the centre as well as a positive Family Time experience for the child/young person.

Once we have the necessary information and are in a position to proceed, the allocated worker will contact the child/young person's parent/s and foster carer/s to confirm the proposed arrangements. They will also contact the child/young person to introduce themselves and will seek their views about Family Time; this will ideally take place through a visit to the child/young person in their placement. The worker will share their personal profile with the child/young person which also contains information about the resource centre that they will be attending.

Prior to the initial Family Time session taking place, the Family Time worker will meet with the parent/s to formulate a Family Time Agreement. This stipulates the expectations of all parties during Family Time as well as detailing the agreed arrangements in respect of when and where Family Time will take place and who will be present. Any support needs can also be planned, for example, the need of a parent to receive modelling and/or guidance in regard to basic care.

The parent/s will be expected to attend the resource centre at least 15 minutes prior to the child/young person, so that a pre-Family Time check can be completed. The purpose of this check is to ensure that the parent/s is "fit for Family Time", that is, they are physically and emotionally well enough to proceed. It is important that this takes place prior to the child or young person departing their placement to attend Family Time.

The Purpose of Family Time

When Wiltshire Council established a Contact Team(Family Time Team), the vision was to provide children and young people with opportunities to spend quality time with the people who were important to them. However, it has been acknowledged that overtime, these opportunities have become more of an extension of the assessment process with an increased emphasis on supervision and recording. While it is of course important to have a record of a child/young person's time spent with their family members, it is strongly felt that we need to re-frame these opportunities and place the emphasis back on ensuring the provision of quality time. Opportunities for assessed Family Time will of course be possible in conjunction with this, but the vision is that such become the exception during a time-limited period, as opposed to the rule. On the basis of the above, two main changes will be introduced with these relating to the level of supervision provided and secondly, the nature of Family Time recordings;

Level of supervision

The time when a child or young person initially becomes accommodated can be a particularly challenging time for the child, young person, and their parent/s. The child or young person will have experienced or have been at risk of experiencing significant harm in the care of their parent/s but may also be concerned about their parent's well-being and will often miss being at home. They will likely be experiencing not only a change of caregiver, but very likely new routines and boundaries. While older children and young people may understand why they cannot live at home, very young children may not have this understanding, and this can add to their confusion. The child or young person's parent/s will also likely feel a range of emotions from anger to guilt to worry. They may be experiencing a decline in their mental health, substance misuse difficulties and/or domestic violence. Their emotions may be compounded by a sense of stigma and there may also be negative repercussions from within the community which exacerbate their emotions.

On this basis, it is acknowledged that in order to support children/young people and their parents appropriately, a level of supervision is required during this time with this providing an opportunity for children, young people, and their parents to settle into the routine of Family Time. Staff will support parents with any element of Family Time that they anticipate will be difficult. They will support parents to answer any questions that the child/young person may have. The Family Time worker will remain present at all times and they will either manage or support the parent/s to effectively manage beginnings and endings with the child or young person's foster carer.

After a maximum of three weeks, (which would generally equate to no less than six sessions of Family Time), a Family Time Review Meeting will be held. The child/young person will be invited to this meeting where appropriate and if not appropriate, their views will be sought by their allocated Family Time worker beforehand. Unless there is evidence of risk to the child/young person, at this review we will discuss on-going arrangements for future Family Time sessions to be facilitated. Each child's family time arrangements will be assessed on an individual basis and this means facilitated family time will be considered as soon as this is considered safe and secure for all involved.

Facilitated Family Time is Family Time which continues to take place at a resource centre and a Family Time worker remains allocated to the family. The worker will continue to meet with the parent/s for their pre-Family Time check to ensure that they are physically and emotionally able to proceed with Family Time. The worker would be present to greet the child/ren and settle them into their Family Time room. From this point, the worker will remain in an office close to the Family Time room and will undertake regular room checks to make sure that all is well. The frequency of room checks can be variable and dependent on the needs of the family. The family would be able to approach their worker at any time should they require assistance. It is also possible for the worker to use baby monitors as a way of monitoring facilitated Family Time. The worker would give a 10-minute warning to let the family know that Family Time would be coming to an end soon. They would also be present at the end of Family Time to support the child/young person returning to their carer. The worker would continue to be available to the parent at the end of Family Time for feedback and a de-brief.

We are hopeful that facilitated Family Time will provide opportunities for the child/young person to be able to enjoy time with their family member in as natural a setting as possible but at the same time, in a stable setting that will provide everything that they need in terms of provisions and in a setting whereby regular checks would be undertaken by means of ensuring the child's well-being. Of course, there will always be cases which will require on-going supervision and we anticipate these to include situations whereby;

- There is a risk of sexual harm or immediate physical harm to the child/young person;
- The parent/s is unable to meet the child's very basic care needs as a result of a learning need and/or disability;
- Circumstance whereby the level of trauma experienced at home would mean that the child would feel unsafe if a worker was not present;
- Significant risk of flight which would place the child at imminent risk of harm.

The Foster Carers Role in Family Time

In the last year there has been an increased focus on the role of foster carers in Family Time. The importance of the foster carer's role was highlighted when considering what children and young people tell us about their experiences of Family Time and what they feel would make it better. Responses predominantly include their wish to have greater flexibility in the activities that they can engage in during Family Time and a wish to do the things that their peers who live at home are able to do, for example going to the park, going to feed the ducks, or going out for a meal. These requests are not significant demands, but these opportunities are very valuable in that they provide children, young people and their parents with additional enjoyment and memories, while also providing a greater sense of normality.

Improving a child/young person's experience of Family Time and being able to act upon their voice resulted in a joint initiative being developed between the Specialist Assessment, Intervention and Family Time Team (SAIFT) and the Fostering Service in 2020. In acknowledgement that while the parents who we work with cannot necessarily care for their children/young people on a permanent basis, but that the vast majority do not pose a significant risk within the context and confines of planned and structured Family Time, our fostering colleagues embraced the prospect of their carers being supported to play a role in Family Time. Since this time, our teams have co-delivered Family Time Training to foster carers while the Fostering Services have also incorporated an emphasis on foster carers role in Family Time into their recruitment, training, and annual review processes.

The recent developments are very positive, particularly given how the importance of positive relationships between parents and carers is outlined in "Contact Between Children in Care or Adopted and their Families: Six Key Messages from Research", where it is stated that *"Good relationships between foster carers, kinship carers, adoptive parents and birth parents contribute to creating positive experiences for children, whereas conflict between carers and parents is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety and behavioural difficulties in children"*.



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The relationship between the foster carer and parent should of course be positively promoted throughout the child/young person's journey, starting with the parent visiting their placement before this commencing and through collaborative information sharing at the placement planning meeting (both of which are now subject to closer monitoring) and positive communication at the child/young person's statutory reviews.

While focus has been on supporting foster carers to play a role in Family Time once permanence plans have been established, there is no reason why they cannot play a role in Family Time during pre and care proceedings. They could for example be present during Family Time sessions within the resource centres; this would be another way of the important adults in the child/young person's life building a relationship which we know is important to children and young people.

Any decision for a foster carer to be involved in Family Time will be carefully considered. Within pre or care proceedings, the appropriateness of this arrangement would be considered following the first Family Time review and again at all subsequent reviews.

For children subject to permanence plans, it would be hoped that the child/young person's foster carer would have been involved in Family Time during the proceedings and as such, a positive relationship between the carer and parent would have already developed. In these cases, the Specialist Assessment, Intervention and Family Time Team (SAIFT) would support a reduction/transition plan (this would typically take place over 6-8 weeks but tailored to the child/young person's needs) which would conclude with arrangements for the foster carer undertaking Family Time in the community.

A gradual process would be followed, for example, it may be that as an initial step, the foster carers joins Family Time sessions at the resource centre while the worker remained present. The next step would be for them to be present while the worker remained in the vicinity. From here, the team could support the beginnings and endings of Family Time while the child, their parent and carer spend a short time in the community. Careful monitoring will help ensure that these arrangements progress positively and at a pace that suits the child/young person.

All arrangements will be underpinned by a Family Time Agreement which will set out the boundaries and expectations of all involved. Family Time arrangements will also continue to be reviewed however at the end of the reduction/transition period, the role of the Specialist Assessment, Intervention and Family Time Team (SAIFT) would end, and subsequent reviews will be coordinated by the child/young person's Social Worker and the Foster Carers Supervising Social Worker.

Family Time arrangements should continue to be reviewed by the child or young person's Independent Reviewing Officer during their looked-after reviews.

Of note, although focused on foster carers, the above would also apply for children/young people whose permanence plan was going to be one of Special Guardianship. The Special Guardian could join Family Time during the proceedings in the same manner. This would support the notion of the Family Court in regard to the need for a child/young person to be able to develop a satisfactory relationship with their Special Guardian prior to final Orders being made. Of course, this arrangement may not always be appropriate and would unlikely be successful during the proceedings if the parent opposes the SGO application.



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Long-Term Family Time Arrangements

The Specialist Assessment Intervention and family Time Team (SAIFT) will continue to provide supervision for any cases whereby the level of risk cannot be mitigated through the presence of a foster carer. However, these arrangements will be subject to regular reviews and wherever possible, there will be an agreed plan of intervention which will be progressed with the child, young person and/or their parent/s so that any risks can be reduced as opposed to these risks remaining stagnant. We feel that this would be beneficial because as the child/young person gets older, it may well be that they do return home and it may be that they seek to return home earlier than we would consider appropriate; addressing areas of concern on an on-going basis would therefore help to ensure that this is a suitable and safe arrangement for that child/young person.

Family Time Recordings

By promoting the emphasis being on quality Family Time and the child/young person's experience, rather than Family Time being an extended form of assessment, there will be changes in the way that we record these encounters. Verbatim minutes will no longer be the norm, instead, the Family Time worker, who is experienced and skilled in supporting Family Time, will comment on the provision of basic care however recordings will have greater focus on significant information as well as information that would be important to the child/young person to know when they are older. All recordings will be written to the child/young person.

Of course, and as previously outlined, some of the Family Time sessions will be observed to inform parenting assessments. These assessed sessions will however be distinguished from general Family Time sessions and it will be possible for more in-depth/verbatim notes to be taken. The child/young person's Social Worker and Guardian will of course continue to be invited to observe Family Time for the purpose of assessment.

Other points for consideration

Virtual Family Time

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen the introduction of virtual Family Time for our children and young people. While virtual Family Time alone is not an adequate replacement for direct Family Time, our experience has informed that many young people and their parents have enjoyed this form of Family Time; it has aided regular Family Time when distance has been a barrier and it has worked well for children who have been reintroduced to a parent they have not seen for some time. Children and young people have enjoyed being able to show their parent/s around their placement and some parents have enjoyed observing positive interactions between the child and their foster carer. Improved interaction and communication between the parent and the foster carer/s have also been an additional benefit introduced through virtual Family Time.

The role of the wider family in Family Time

While extended family members may not be able to offer permanent care for our looked after children and young people, they could be an appropriate person to support the child or young person's long-term Family Time opportunities. This would likely increase opportunities for our looked after children and young people to spend time with those within their wider family network. Of course, these arrangements will need to be risk assessed by the child/young person's allocated Social Worker. The Specialist Assessment, Intervention and Family Time Team (SAIFT) would be happy to facilitate transition plans and the development of Family Time Agreements as set out above.

Family Time Endings

As we know from research, the ending of a relationship is significant. When reflecting on a child or young person's Family Time journey, we should remember that both they and their parent/s spend a significant amount of time at the resource centres and with their allocated worker. The children and young people that we work with very often develop trusting relationships with their worker and for some parents, their worker has been the most consistent person in their life during the proceedings and also a person who has offered them emotional support and containment. It is therefore important that "endings" are acknowledged and planned appropriately.

On this basis, the time limited role of the worker will be explained to the child/young person when they first meet. The workers will be clear and transparent with children and young people so that they can appropriately anticipate any impending end to their attendance at the centre. Following the final Family Time session, the child or young person's allocated worker will arrange an "ending"

session alone with the child. This would be spent doing a fun activity or perhaps, a session spent completing the child or young person's Family Time Journey book. We hope that by marking this ending positively, the children and young people will gain a positive experience of a relationship coming to an end, as opposed to feelings of loss, confusion, and rejection.

The worker will also meet with the child/young person's parent to mark the ending of this relationship. The worker will complete an ending letter for the parent and include their favourite recollections from Family Time and perhaps their favourite photograph. They will also signpost accordingly if this would be beneficial.

Dated September 2021