

CONTACT WITH PARENTS AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS

The majority of foster children return home within a short period of coming into care. Other children who will not return home still need to keep a relationship with their parents or other family members. **As every child's circumstances are different it is important that arrangements for parental contact should be discussed with the individual social worker for the child.** You will need to find out from the social worker whether parents or relatives can take the child on outings from your home, how often and where contact will occur. It is generally expected that contact visits will take place in the foster home. These arrangements should be written on the Placement Agreement form.

Children who are being looked after by the Local Authority on a short-term basis, especially young children, need regular reassurance about home. Your help in keeping contact with the child's family by phone calls, letters and visits is vital in helping the child cope with the separation, for the child's emotional development and sense of identity and it will help ease the transition back home. The child's social worker will discuss this with you.

Contact arrangements can be difficult for all concerned. Parents of children in foster care often have feelings of guilt, failure or resentment because they are not able to care for their own children, and because of this they often find visiting foster homes difficult. At times some parents can strain the patience of foster carers - when they make rash promises they cannot keep, when they overload the child with sweets or when they don't visit as arranged. There are however also many instances of foster carers and parents forming helpful and lasting relationships. Many parents are grateful for the care you give to their children. Parents can learn parenting techniques by watching you deal with everyday situations. Children really benefit by not having to choose between parents but can accept that both sets of "carers" have a role in their life

Though foster carers generally appreciate that some situations are caused by the parent's difficulties, there will be times when it will be difficult not to react angrily. You will need to be tactful in order not to appear critical and need to appreciate that the over-giving of sweets or gifts or promises is an attempt to compensate themselves and their child. Broken promises often come about because the parent cannot face reality. Please discuss any difficulties with your fostering social worker or the child's social worker.

If you have any safety concerns about contact with a parent you should discuss them with the social worker. In certain circumstances your name and address can be kept confidential and all contact can take place away from your home.

The Children and Young People's Service will always work hard to keep brothers and sisters in contact with each other. Ideally we try and place them together in the same foster home but this is not always possible. We now know from research that children who grow up in care or in adoptive homes do much better if they remain in contact with their brothers and sisters. Anything that you can do to help in this contact and to make it seem relaxed and natural can only help your foster child. It is much better if an elder brother or sister can be invited round for tea than to have to meet in a Leicestershire County Council office. Grandparents can also play an important support role to a child in foster care.

For the child in long term care, who has little or no parental contact, it might seem easier to try and persuade the child to forget the past. They will however be better able to settle with you if they know that they are able to talk to you about their family and are free to ask questions. The children who know little or nothing about their parents and background are likely to fantasise and conjure up images of "perfect parents" or "ogres". The amount of information and help children need in talking about their past will differ according to their age or stage of development. It is therefore important that you discuss with the child's social worker how much you should tell them about their own family.

Do try and make sure that the child has access to photographs of their parents and family members. Keep the things that they brought from home. Try and include references to the child's past into every day conversation. "Your grandmother came from Derbyshire, didn't she?" "Do you want to give your mum a copy of your school photograph?" This all gives a child permission to speak about their family and to put into context all the things that have happened in the past

Contact risk assessments. At the start of each placement social workers should carry out a risk assessment about contact issues. This should be discussed at the **Placement agreement meeting.**