



TIME OUT
fostering

valuing individual needs

TIME OUT FOSTERING
CONTACT POLICY

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Contact

Supporting contact is one of the most emotional aspects of foster care. Helping a child to keep in touch with people important to them and ensuring that it is a positive experience can be a real challenge. The success of this can improve outcomes, can help the child to maintain a sense of identity and continuity and can enable personal growth and development.

Local Authorities have a duty under the Children Act to promote contact between a child who is being looked after and those connected with them. Sometimes this is voluntary and sometimes it is ordered by a court.

Time Out Fostering provides help and support to the carer to deal with any difficulties that may arise.

Contact often means visits between the child and the birth parents, but can include telephone calls, cards and presents at birthdays and Christmas or the exchange of letters and photographs.

Particular attention is paid to contact arrangements where a child is at risk of losing contact with specific aspects of his or her heritage.

Planning

Arrangements for contact visits will be made at the Placement Plan Agreement Meeting at the start of the placement. The needs and views of the child should be paramount, but the agreement should consider the needs of parents, other people important to the child, the foster carers and their families.

Who should be involved

Time Out Fostering believes that it is in the best interests of most children for contact to take place in the carer's home, where they should feel most comfortable, and that carers are the most appropriate people to supervise contact. This enables the carer to help the child to discuss any feelings they may have before, during and after the contact and for the carer to understand and help with any difficulties that may arise.

However, if a child is at risk of harm or the parents are unpredictable, contact may take place away from the carer's home and may be supervised by someone else.

Arrangements

Everything needs to be written down so that all involved are clear about what has been agreed and why. Carers should be aware that as time goes on circumstances may change, and be prepared to adapt to different arrangements. These should always be discussed fully to ensure that everyone's needs continue to be taken into consideration. The new arrangements should be clearly recorded.

Different needs

Contact needs vary greatly according to the age of the child and their care plan. Young children may need to see their parent or parents very frequently, even everyday, particularly if the plan is for them to return home. Older children may see their families less often. Sometimes children may not be

able to see their families at all. Whatever the decisions that are made and the circumstances that have led to the child being away from home, carers should understand that the child will often have strong attachments to their family and be prepared to answer questions sensitively and truthfully. They should be careful not to be judgemental in any way.

Working together

The best outcomes for children are achieved when foster carers and birth parents can work together in a positive partnership. Birth parents need to be accepted as they are and be respected at all times. The carers should react in a sensitive and professional manner to any difficulties during contact visits, and accept that this may be a very difficult time for birth parents.

Things to remember

Contact visits are important, limited times for children and their families to spend together. Carers should facilitate this but stay in the background as much as possible.

Children may behave differently before and after contact visits. Carers should be aware and sensitive to this but should not make assumptions based on behaviour. There may be many reasons that take time to understand. Parents may resent the fact that carers are paid and may refer to this. Parents may be embarrassed and uncomfortable if carers have a better standard of living than them.

Parents may worry that foster carers will replace them in their child's affections.

Parents may criticise social workers or other professionals.

Parents may feel as if they are being judged and find it difficult to behave naturally with their child during contact visits.

Contact visits should be positive experiences for all concerned and may be quite informal, fun occasions.

Recording

Foster carer records of contact visits can be one of the most important parts of their records and will be considered at review meetings. Their observations of child/parent interactions should be objective and detailed. If there are court proceedings or particular difficulties, carers will be advised by their supervising social worker and the child's social worker about the best way to record observations. Carers should also record how the child behaves after contact.

Outcomes

A good contact visit will leave everyone with positive feelings. The child will feel reassured that they are loved by their parents and that their parents are alright. The parent will feel valued by their child and by all others involved. The child and parent will have good memories of the time together. The foster carers will feel valued and professional. Social workers will have a better understanding of the relationships between the child and their parents.

All this leads to improved outcomes for the child.