

Family Time

‘Connections & Belongings’

1. Principles

The following set of principles should inform practice when assessing, planning for, arranging and reviewing family time arrangements for children, young people and their families.

The safety and welfare of children and young people should always be your priority when considering Family time. The views of parents and wider family members are important, especially as they hold parental for their children, but the law requires that the safety and welfare of the child is paramount, and you must make sure this is the loudest consideration. (Family Justice Young People’s Board (FJYPB).

The Families First Partnership programme guide illustrates the importance of family decision making. The Children’s Social Care National Framework (2023) provides principles, values and outcomes, one of which is Outcome 2, this states that Children and Young People should be supported by their family network. Family time allows for this to happen and promotes the child’s sense of belonging and creates the opportunity of lifelong connections.

Family time that feels safe and beneficial is important and helps to build and maintain relationships with significant people in children and young people’s lives. Young Voices Influencing Care (YVIC) and FJYPB advocate that family time can help young people to heal and learn to trust and is beneficial for them, even when they have previously experienced harm.

Children, young people and their families need to be clear about their family time arrangements. For instance, what this looks like and whether this works with other arrangements such as school, college, seeing friends, managing hobbies and interests and their downtime. The arrangement the local authority make should not be exhausting or tiring for the children and should be done in conjunction with their wishes and feelings.

Preparing children and their families is essential to ensure that any worries that they need to share can be acted upon, so that they enjoy the time with their family. Reviewing the arrangements is of equal importance therefore they should be asked how they feel and whether there should be any suggested changes that will make a

difference to them. This should be done in line with family time reviews and visits to the children.

The following Principles should be applied:

- There is a presumption that family time is facilitated between children who are looked after and their parents, sisters and brothers, any relative, friend or other person connected with the child unless it is not reasonably practicable or consistent with the child's welfare.
- Family time with significant people may have been lost and consideration should be given as to how this can be re-established during any assessment, intervention and support. This will be explored when we consider the Genogram and undertake the wishes and feelings work.
- Where children have moved on from care givers, family time should be maintained unless this is not in the child's interests. Sometimes, following an unplanned ending, feelings are high, and it is important that children and young people have an opportunity to work through the changes and loss they may be experiencing before we consider the family time arrangements.
- Family time must always be beneficial for the child, and we need to consider a 'Whole Family' approach to ensure that parent/relative or friend are equally supported, and explanations provided to the adults and extended ' , when the child or young person has expressed that they do not wish to attend.
- Family time should only be supervised where it is necessary to ensure children are safeguarded and their welfare promoted.
- Where family time needs to be supervised, then this is better if it can be undertaken by someone familiar to the child, an extended family member, friend or a key worker / care giver wherever possible. The allocated practitioner will undertake an assessment to consider who is suitable to facilitate.
- The role of the foster carer in family time should be carefully considered in the planning stages of family time. All foster carers/ caregivers have a role to play in family time. Wherever possible foster carers should transport and support with family time arrangements, including the supervision of family time. This should be arranged in a planned way in consultation with the Supervising practitioner and allocated Social Worker for the child(ren).
- Any transport arrangements should allow plenty of time for the child or young person to enable them to arrive on time and feeling as relaxed as possible and so that the time with their family is not reduced because of getting them there late. Equally, any travel arrangements made for the journey back should allow the full time of the allocated family time. If transport arrives before the end of the session, there should not be the expectation that the child or young person will leave earlier than planned unless the child/ren wish to do so.
- Family time should take place in venues that are appropriate for children and young people; given their ages and who they are meeting up with. An office building without family rooms is not usually a good place to have a positive

family time experience. Young People in Care in Hull via the Bright Spots survey have shared the importance of asking them where they would like to see people and that we try to minimise contact centres wherever possible.

- Family time should be fun and enjoyable for children and young people but not necessarily costly. Consideration should be given to spending money wisely. Where there are discounts on activities and locations available for family time, these should be utilised wherever possible.
- The assessment about family time and the subsequent arrangements will take into consideration the ethnicity, culture, and language needs (including those where English is not their first language) of children, young people, and their families. Where family time is to be supervised, the assessment should consider if the use of interpreters is required for example if supervised family time is required for a newborn baby, then an interpreter will not be required if the child/ren are older than an interpreter will be required.
- Children and young people have a choice about who they wish to have family time with and have the right to change their minds about this over time.
- Maintaining family time with sisters and brothers from both the same or different parents is reported by children to be one of their highest priorities and every effort must be made to ensure this is supported.
- Hull is committed to restorative (or relational) practice. Having contact with family members is consistent with our restorative principles and family time should be undertaken in line with this approach.
- Family time should not be as a reward or punishment and should be a child's right to have family time, unless this is not in the best interest of the child.

2. Approving and Planning Family Time. Family time should be in a manner consistent with the child's Care Plan, which, itself, must take account of any Child Protection Plan or Contact Order that may be in force.

Family time planning meetings should be held with the Family Time Worker and allocated practitioner and include the family. This is to ensure that the family time is pre planned and any additional expectations agreed prior to family time taking place. This also allows for time to risk assess and identify any potential triggers which could cause the children harm or distress. In this agreement there should be a plan for who is and isn't allowed to attend and this should be held within the Child's records for any professional supervising the family time.

The purpose of the family time and how it will be evaluated must be made clear in the Plan. Family time arrangements need to focus on, and shaped around, the child's needs. The child's welfare is always the paramount consideration and each child's wishes and needs for family time should be individually considered using advocacy and communication services, if necessary. Family time can be very important in helping children develop their sense of identity and understand their lives.

The wishes and feelings of parents and the child's care givers must be ascertained before a decision about family time arrangements are made or as far as it is reasonably practicable to do so.

Both direct and indirect family time arrangements should always be clearly detailed, setting out how family time will take place, the venue, the frequency and how the arrangements will be reviewed.

Where family time is extended as part of a plan to gradually return the child to the parents' care, the Placement with Parents Procedure should be followed. Any family time with someone who has perpetrated domestic abuse or violence must be fully assessed, putting the child's safety and interest first, above any 'pro-family time' approach from the adult's perspective.

Ensure that when you are considering family meetings that we understand the relationships between parents, children and extended family. If for instance either parent is a victim of domestic abuse, we must ensure that we DO NOT ask the perpetrator of domestic abuse to supervise family time or compromise the victim further by expecting them to attend the family meeting together.

We need to consider the extended family's understanding of the relationship and any coercion and control that may exist. This should be explored from the outset of any family decision making arrangements. We DO NOT at any time ask a perpetrator of domestic abuse to provide supervision of family time for the victim. The Local Authority need to ensure that when we plan meetings and send invites, we have considered domestic abuse and the appropriateness of joint attendance or holding a separate meeting.

Victims can continue to be abused within a family time arrangement whether the family are living together or not. Care must be given at times of separation and loss for perpetrators where risk might be heightened. It may be necessary to undertake a separate 'person posing a risk' assessment to inform contact (as well as care) decisions.

3. Different Types of Family Time

Face to face meetings and visits (direct family time) will generally be the best way of maintaining relationships, but other means such as emails / letters, text messages, video calls, photograph exchanges etc. (indirect contact) should be borne in mind.

Practitioners and care givers should work together to explore how electronic media can support positive relationships for children and young people. This could include the use of social media mechanisms such as Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp. Children should be supported to ensure they are safe online rather than this form of family time being avoided.

4. Family Time with brothers and sisters

The relationship between brothers and sisters is possibly the longest relationship that many people will have in their lives, often outlasting the relationship with parents, partners, or friends.

For this reason, a strong sibling bond can be a vital support throughout life and for Children Looked After this kind of stability is especially important in a world where so much is out of their control.

Children of different ages can have siblings who remain at home or who are spread across multiple care placements or adopted separately. Every situation is unique, and there are numerous circumstances that may result in brothers and sisters not living together.

Children should not have to experience yet another loss; by ensuring siblings have regular, high quality family time allowing them to develop and maintain a healthy relationship with one another.

Where children are placed with separate care givers, care givers would be supported to arrange regular family time sessions between them. This could be visiting each other's houses for tea or both households, taking a trip to the park.

These sessions should be normal everyday activities that do not require a significant cost. Family time with birth parents or between brothers and sisters does not always have to take place with everyone attending together.

Sometimes, individual sessions between a child and a parent can help develop and improve relationships and the family time arrangements that may be right for one child, may not meet the needs of another, and it is therefore important to look at the

individual needs of children and make an informed decision based on a clear assessment of the child's needs and relationships with siblings and parents.

Family time sessions between siblings needs to be assessed and appropriate levels of support or supervision put in place if required, depending on the ages and circumstances of the children.

Any arrangements outside of the supervised family time between siblings should not involve a parent-to-parent handover where domestic violence has been a feature within the relationship unless this has been carefully considered through the family decision making meetings and is fully risk assessed with potential third parties.

5. Unsupervised, Loosely Facilitated or Supervised Family Time

Family time will be unsupervised, loosely facilitated or fully supervised.

Unsupervised family time means that the sessions take place with no-one else there, with a specific role to facilitate, support or supervise the sessions.

Loosely Facilitated Family Time: is where some support is provided for the sessions such as a room in a Contact Centre or a Children's Centre; and where possible, staff might greet everyone beforehand and pop in to ask if anything is needed.

For Children's Centres, this would need to have been agreed with the setting prior to arranging the booking of the room. Front of house staff should be aware of any potential issues which may arise and safety planning within buildings where professionals may be called upon to support should be considered in this planning.

As we know family time can cause children distress and involve children displaying behaviours such as running away or struggling with endings and being transported after family time. In these situations, and where this is known, a safety plan should be completed to ensure risks identified are considered and where possible mitigated to allow family time to be enjoyable.

Supervised Family Time: involves someone being allocated to be present throughout the whole session and a written record is kept. The Practitioner should consider whether family time will need to be supervised as part of the assessment and planning process by the Social Worker, Practitioner and their Team Manager. It is the responsibility of the child's Social Worker or lead practitioner to ensure that the person(s) supervising contact is appropriately skilled and experienced to do so.

6. Assessment of Family Time Arrangements

The primary focus of the assessment of this issue will be the safety and welfare of the child. A decision needs to be made, based on an assessment, as to whether any support or supervision of family time is required.

Where supervised family time is deemed necessary, the reasons should be clearly recorded, and the role of the supervisor/s should be clearly defined.

A written risk/ safety plan assessment must be completed before any supervised family time begins.

This risk assessment/safety plan must take account of all factors that could impact on the success of supervised family time and relevant safeguards including:

- a. Any history of abuse or threats of abuse to the child, carer givers, staff or others.
- b. Previous threats to disrupt family time or failure to cooperate with conditions agreed for supervised family time.
- c. Previous incidents or threats of abduction.
- d. Previous incidents of coercion or inappropriate behaviour during family time.
- e. Parent/s is threatening or emotionally abusive in their discourse with the child.
- f. The child's behaviour and needs, including medical needs.

Where any of the above features in the risk assessment/safety plan, and supervised family time is to continue, the risk assessment must state the specific measures to be put in place to minimise risks.

The assessment must then be approved and signed by the allocated worker. Where supervised family time takes place, the detailed arrangements for the supervision must be set out in the Placement Plan or safety plans for those not looked after. In addition, there should be a written Family Time Agreement with the parents and other parties having supervised family time sessions, signed by them, which should state clearly any specific conditions relating to the sessions and any expectations placed on the parents, care givers and workers:

- The agreement should be clear about where the sessions take place and whether any flexibility is allowed for activity or movements within or away from the agreed location.
- It should also be clear about whether the person(s) having contact are permitted to give the child food, drinks, gifts or money during the sessions.
- It should state clearly the circumstances in which family time will be terminated.
- The agreement should state the adults who will be allowed to attend for supervised contact and supervisors should be asked to apply that strictly.

- Particular attention should be given to when and how visits are ended. It is probably best that all 'goodbyes' take place indoors with the visitors asked to leave before children are returned to their placements.
- Significant changes to Care Plans, Court proceedings and/or decisions made about the frequency of future family times are all likely to be potential tension points so extra vigilance should apply at any sessions arranged around these times.

Social Workers/ Lead Practitioners must make sure that locations chosen for family time can accommodate any conditions agreed. Family time workers/Practitioners should try to ensure that locations for family time have appropriate space and age-appropriate toys and equipment. In more risky situations, those organising and supervising the family time might want to choose locations where early and easy support can be made with other parties or agencies such as the Police if required.

In some cases, prior to the sessions, the Police should agree prearranged responses in the event of problems emerging the staff and care givers and any other person involved in the supervision of the family time should have copies of the written agreement and sometimes the risk assessment.

Careful consideration should be given to whether family or known persons should be identified as the family time supervisor. This is especially the case when the plan is to place the child within the family. What would need to be considered is whether this arrangement would place too much pressure on the placement and whether the family time would have sufficient structure for the child and parents.

Where possible, those supervising and or transporting the child to the family time sessions should be known to the child and the family before the family time takes place.

This person should be the care giver or foster carer wherever possible. The supervisor's observations of the sessions must be clearly recorded on Liquid Logic on the child's case notes selecting the "form tab" then in the drop-down box selecting "contact form" in the child's record and shared with the parents. The Supervisor should be proactive in stepping in to offer advice or support during the sessions where this is required due to the quality of the family time that is taking place.

The supervisor must immediately report to the Social Worker any concerns or positive observations about the parents' conduct during the session. The Social Worker in consultation with his/her manager should consider the need to review the risk assessment and/or the family time arrangements considering the concerns expressed.

7. What Information is Required for the Interim Care Plan, the Placement Plan, the Looked After Child Review and the Final Care Plan?

The proposed family time arrangements only should be included in the Interim Care Plan.

The proposed family time arrangements only should be included in the Placement Plan.

By the time of the first looked after child review, assessment and analysis for family time must be carried out. The prompts for assessment and analysis are set out in the Assessment for Contact / Family Time document and should be included in the 'Care Plan/Social Worker Report for a Review' document on Liquid Logic in the 'Review of Contact / Family Time arrangements.

The proposed family time arrangements should be included in the Care Plan.

8. Reviewing of Family Time Arrangements

The social worker, family time reviewing officer, family time workers keep family time arrangements, including the continuing need for supervision, under regular review.

The risk assessment in relation to the arrangements for supervising family times must be reviewed at least every six months for children/young people in Long Term Looked After Care (ILAC) and 6 weekly for those still in proceedings.

This can be undertaken sooner, if any incident or report identifies concerns by the social worker or Family Time Planning & Reviewing Officer.

Any significant reactions that the child has to family time should be reported to the child's Social Worker by those observing the family time arrangements, for example foster carers, residential staff and/or supervisors of the sessions and if required a review to be held as soon as possible.

The family time arrangements should also be reviewed in any Placement Planning Meeting and at the child's Looked after Review.

Where a Contact Order is in force and it is considered that the family time arrangements set out in the Order should be altered, the agreement of the child and the parents should be sought, and legal advice should be obtained as to the need to seek a variation of the Court Order.

9. Cancellation, Suspension or Termination of Family Time

Family Time should never be cancelled unless there is a very good reason, e.g. it is deemed that it would not be safe for it to take place, or the child/adult/sibling attending is too unwell for it to take place, or the child is not wishing to attend.

Where a family member states they do not feel comfortable supervising family time or where an issue when family is supervising becomes apparent, careful consideration should be given to the impact on the child of the continuing contact and a review meeting should be held to review the family time arrangements.

Family time should take place in accordance with the child's Placement Plan, Court Order and any Court Directions. Sometimes some foster carers and Social Workers think that because family time can upset a particular child or young person, they feel that they should reduce it or cancel it altogether; yet many times the child or young person would like the family time to continue regardless. In each case, the child or young person should be consulted before any decision like this is made that affects them.

Wherever possible, the care giver should consult the child's Social Worker in advance if they consider there is a good reason to cancel the family time. If family time is cancelled, the Social Worker or, if the Social Worker is not available, the care giver must ensure that the child and, as far as practicable, the parent or other adult is informed in advance and that the reason for the decision is explained.

The Social Worker or staff/care giver should arrange an alternative family time if appropriate; if the child is not wishing to attend another session this will not be rearranged. If family time does not take place and consultation has not been possible with the Social Worker, the care giver must inform the child's Social Worker as soon as possible and confirm in writing/email the decision to cancel and the reason. N.B. Family Time arrangements must not be withdrawn as a Sanction imposed on a child/ren.

Emergency restrictions on family time can only be made to protect the child from significant risk and must be notified to the Placing Authority (child's Social Worker) within 24 hours.

Any proposal to suspend or terminate the family time should be considered as part of the child's Looked After Review, unless the circumstances require an urgent decision to be made, in which case the Social Worker must be consulted, and legal advice should be obtained.

Any such proposal should be made in the context of the overall aims and objectives of the Care Plan, the reasons for the proposal must be explained to the parents and to the child, and their agreement obtained if possible.

Where the proposal is to suspend the family time, legally you are only allowed to do this for 7 working days, an emergency family time review of the current family time with the Family Time Reviewing Officer needs to take place within the 7 days with a view to finding suitable solutions for the family time to be reinstated.

Any family time lost during this period must be given back to the family. The length and purpose of the suspension together with the basis upon which will be reinstated must be made clear.

Where the child is the subject of an Emergency Protection Order, Interim Care Order or full Care Order, an application to the Court for authority to terminate the family time will always be necessary, if family time is to be suspended for more than 7 days.

As soon as such a decision is made, Legal Services should be contacted as a matter of urgency so that the necessary court action can be initiated. Written confirmation of the decision made and, where relevant, the intended court application, together with the reasons, must be sent to the parents/relevant parties, child (depending on age) and any other relevant person (for example the child's advocate, an Independent Visitor or Children's Guardian). Staff/carers and other agencies involved with the child's care must also be informed.

10. Recording of Family Time

When should Family Time be recorded and what is the purpose of recording? Family time must be recorded when it is supervised. The two main reasons for recording Family Time are to:

- Aid decision making in the courts during care proceedings and for other assessments by providing a summary and analysis about the rationale for the Family Time proposal and explain why the proposal is in the child's best interest. This kind of recording should entail detailed observations. Under these circumstances, a copy must be provided to the parents.
- Provides a record for the child or the parent(s) about the time spent together, a record of shared memories.
- Ideally the recording of family time should be shared with the parent by the family time worker at the end of each session, however often due to time constraints and the transportation of child/children back to placements this is not always possible. If this is the case the social worker should share the recordings with the parent/s. Where families are unsupervised or facilitated - a summary of any key observations of the contact experience and any issues arising from it that come to the Social Worker's attention should be recorded. This might include feedback from care givers about the child's mood, behaviour, and presentation before or following contact.

Who should record contact?

Family time should be recorded by the person who is supervising or observing. This may include a social work practitioner, family practitioner, family time worker, or a care giver. The supervisor's observations of each of the sessions must be clearly recorded in the child's record on Liquid Logic and shared with the parents.

Quality of recording

It is important as with any other recording about a child and their family that the person recording adheres to the following principles:

- They must be clear about why they are doing it – the purpose.
- They must be clear about who is going to read it – who is the audience. At a minimum this will be the child and their parent(s) but may also include the Family Court judge and other legal professionals, and other social work practitioners and Team Manager.
- Language should be accessible and able to be read by the child (and grown-up child) and their family.
- The recording should be clear and concise.
- The recording should be analytical, not just descriptive.
- If English is not the first language of someone reading the recording, this must be translated into the relevant language for each person.
- A strengths-based approach should be adopted rather than merely seeking to record deficits - the recording should provide a balance between what was good and what could have been better.
- The parents are informed that the family time is being recorded. The parent/s have a right to have a copy of the recording as soon as it has been written up. This will enable the parent to know what has been recorded and that there would be no surprises about what has been recorded when the information is presented to Court. It also allows the parent/s to make any necessary changes to their engagement during any future family times.