

Good Practice Guidance Note: Contact

1. Contact is for children. It is important for adults too, but the benefits to the child are the most important consideration. Parents and professionals have to balance the benefits of contact with the responsibility to protect a child. If there is a conflict between the rights and interests of a child and those of the parent, the interests of the child will prevail.
2. In a private law case where parents separate or divorce, contact for the non-resident parent will usually only be restricted in circumstances where there is a risk to the child. Any contact recommended should be according to the best interests of the child.
3. In care proceedings cases, contact levels may start with a degree of restriction, for example to promote a child's recovery from trauma. As Shemmings and Shemmings say, 'Early maltreatment is biochemically toxic, because it changes the way the brain develops as well as how the mind makes sense of relationships' (Shemmings D and Shemmings Y, 2012). A period of minimal contact or no contact may help the healing process. Subjecting the child to tiring commuting or long drives for interim contact sessions, potentially with inconsistent escorts, can undermine a child's temporary security. However, contact can also reassure a child and support placement stability, however badly she or he has been treated. Contact may also be a bridge to support the child in managing the transition from home into care away from home.
4. The level of contact in care proceedings and in private law cases featuring risk needs to be set in line with the evidence base from contact observation which should be reflected in the child's contact plan. Contact observation will show whether a child is happy or distressed by contact, and the contact plan should be adjusted upwards if benefits can be demonstrated and downwards if contact is detrimental. However, not all signs of distress during contact are due to a relationship problem with the parent in question, so caution needs to be exercised until there is certainty that it is the parent causing the distress. Contact supervisors have a key role to play in supporting parents to improve the child's contact experience, through teaching and mentoring parents and children. Contact notes are also important to maintain.
5. If the child is in care, contact plans must be set for each individual child according to their needs, not formulaically and not defensively, such as when a high level of contact is set to counteract possible parental challenge. Contact must never be a bargaining chip at the courtroom door, in order to reach an agreement on a bigger issue in a case such as residence. Maintaining a high level of contact is rarely the make or break issue in whether a child can return home to live safely with a parent/s from whom she or he was removed. There is no evidence that frequency of contact is related to the occurrence of reunification of the child back to their parents (Humphreys C and Kiraly M, 2011, p5). The main determinant of safe reunification will be issues like leaving a violent partner for good, or coming off drugs, and that is where attention in the case needs to go and stay.

6. Contact levels would normally increase, including overnight stays, if a reunification plan is actively being pursued, but not during the assessment phase of a case. If a child is moving towards permanence away from home, contact levels will normally decrease.
7. The more the assessed risks to the child, or the wider the parenting capacity gap and the poorer the attachment between parent and child, the more contact needs to be supervised and monitored as well as supported. In lower risk cases, supported contact will be sufficient. Unsupported contact has some risks but so does overcrowding a contact session as this can inhibit enjoyment, communication and relationship-building between a parent and a child.
8. In private law cases with potential risks to the child from domestic violence, the Cafcass Safe Contact Indicator should be used in addition to the CAADA-DASH tool.
9. In private law cases without significant parenting concerns, and where parents cannot agree, the arrangements for the child should be those that cause least disruption to her or his daily life and routines, and which maximise the involvement of both parents in her/his care.
10. Contact levels in all cases should be flexible as children's needs change from time to time and over time. It is important that contact is kept under long-term review by all concerned.
11. Contact in the 21st century makes use of social media and technology to keep in touch, such as Skype, Facebook and Facetime. Contact via social media has its own timelines which are much more negotiated between the individuals involved, and generally unmediated by professionals. This carries both risks and opportunities which have to be considered as part of an overall assessment of contact for an individual child.
12. As children grow up, they are more likely to have a network of family and friends who they would like to, and who they would not like to, keep in touch with. Consideration of the child's network, including the importance of siblings, is crucial. Contact must not be reduced to an artificial polarisation between the child's two parents. Parents can benefit from a broader approach to contact assessment, as they can sometimes see the child's world as it is, not through their eyes only. For a child, the need and desire for contact with all children and adults in their network is likely to be differentiated: different amounts of time; different frequencies; and doing different things.
13. All social workers reporting to family courts about contact should assemble an evidence base for the type and frequency of contact, including the evidence base for indirect contact or no contact at all if that is in a child's best interests. In public law cases, local authorities can suspend contact for up to 7 days, then they must apply to a court for an Order for authority to refuse to allow contact under s34 (4) of the Children Act 1989. Ending contact in private law cases will need to be considered as an integral element of a wider case analysis.

References:

Collier C, *Papers! Papers! Papers! Contact notes in care proceedings*, 2012, Seen and Heard, NAGALRO

Humphreys C and Kiraly M, *High frequency family contact: a road to nowhere for infants*, 2011, Child and Family Social Work, Blackwell 27/2/12

Neil E, Beek M, Thoburn J, Schofield G and Ward E, *Contact arrangements for adopted children*, 2012, University of East Anglia

Shemmings D, Shemmings Y, *Indicators of disorganised attachment in children*, Community Care Magazine, 12/3/12