

Safe Family Time

The [Family Justice Young people's Board](#) (FJYPB) have created this Practitioner Guide for arranging SAFE FAMILY TIME, reflecting on their personal experiences and sharing with you what helps children and young people to feel safe and secure, and things they would like you to consider when recommending and planning their time with a family member as part of family court proceedings.

PRINCIPLES

- 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 responsibility 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 in your advice to the court or in the decisions being made in court.
- Family Time that feels **safe** and **beneficial** is important to help us build or maintain relationships with significant people in our lives. When we have previously experienced harm or difficulties in those relationships, Family Time can help us to heal and learn to trust again but may also cause us distress and further harm. Any arrangements you help decide for us must be assessed as safe and in **our best interests**.
- We **expect and need to be involved** in the planning and decision-making around our Family Time. We may be feeling scared, nervous, or unsure if we are allowed to be excited and need your support to help share how we are feeling.
- We need to feel **confident** that our Family Time arrangements will be safe and expect that you will be able to tell us why and how you know this. You should be able to tell us about the arrangements for support if we have any questions or concerns.
- We need you to be **clear** about what our Family Time arrangements will look like and to have considered whether they work with our arrangements for school, seeing friends, managing our hobbies and our downtime. The arrangements you make should not be exhausting and tiring for us.
- Helping us and our family members **prepare** for Family Time is important. We may have worries that we need to talk to you about and reducing these will help us to look forward to and better enjoy our time together.
- You need to ask how our Family Time arrangements are feeling for us. **Reviewing** is an important part of understanding whether Family Time is meeting our needs. It may not feel right for us, and we may be able to suggest changes that will make a difference. After every engagement, someone should ask how it is working and feeling – we should be able to expect that this is reviewed and that a professional is taking notice of this.
- Please tell us how we will be **supported** with Family Time after your work with us ends. Knowing who we can talk to and what we can do if we are worried about the arrangements is important.
- **We are allowed to change our minds**; let us know who we can speak to if we do.
- **We especially need to know what the consequences are and for who if the court orders family time and we don't want to or don't feel safe to attend.** This should be spelled out by the court, especially if we didn't want the time to be agreed in the first place.

PLANNING

- Have the best understanding that you can from our families and others who know us, about our experiences and situations before we meet with you. We need you to understand any risks for us as well as the impact of these.
- Think about our age, needs and uniqueness, including culture, ethnicity, faith, and ability, when planning your engagement with us and for our Family Time arrangements.
- It is important that you plan well for the meetings with us. Don't make asking us about Family Time the first thing you do when we meet. Get to know us first so that we can start building a relationship with and our trust in you.
- Ask us about the best place to meet - somewhere neutral may be better for us, particularly if we are worried about pressure from a parent.
- Be honest and explain beforehand that we will be talking about Family Time. This helps us to prepare for difficult conversations.

IN YOUR MEETING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- Be flexible in your approach to engagement with us and the resources you might use. Some children and young people may be uncomfortable engaging with certain activities as they might feel they are too childish or confusing. As FJYPB members we remember a variety of methods being used to help engage us, but we all agree that the best engagement with professionals is when you provide options, such as to draw, write, use questioning games with cards or dice, use dolls or other figures / characters, use App games, or just help us to talk.
- Explain again what you will be talking to us about and tell us that you understand that this may feel worrying and confusing, that there are no right or wrong answers and that it is okay to have messy feelings.
- Be clear about who you will share information with and why. We may be worried about how our parents will respond if we tell you that we want or don't want to spend time with either or both of them. Make sure that we feel safe to share our feelings.
- Check with us your understanding of what we've said during the meeting, so we and you know this is accurate.
- Ask what good Family Time would look like for us and involve us in developing a plan that reflects this. Think about what else you need to consider with us when planning Family Time to minimise disruption, such as school, activities and interests, friendships and time with others that are important to us.
- Be open and honest with us about why you think it is or is not safe for us to spend time with a family member. For example, if a parent has attended a course or completed work to address concerns, we want to know about that and how you are reassured about the changes that have been made.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Family Time can be triggering for us, consider the experiences we've had and what actions need to be taken to reassure us and to help us be ready to spend time with a family member. We may have experienced feeling fearful, confused, resentful, and hurt towards the family member so please think about what you can do to support us to manage and overcome these emotions.



"Easing into it would be the best-case scenario for me. You can't expect a child to be okay with consistent 50/50 time straight away especially in the context of domestic abuse. Children and young people can be extremely influenced from what they see, memories can come back and then having to see that parent can cause concerns."

- If Family Time is being planned with a parent or other family member who we haven't yet met, don't remember or haven't seen for some time, consider with us how we can best be prepared for this, and the support we will need during and after the time we spend with them. What support might they also need to help them understand and meet our current needs?

"I hadn't seen them in a really long time and they just didn't know me and we struggled to get to know each other"



- Really think about what our parents say they want in terms of time with us and 'hand over' days. Is this practical and realistic and does it meet **our** needs rather than theirs? How do you know that? Family Time should primarily be for our benefit and the quality of this, rather than quantity, is what is important to us. We are not a bartering tool for our parents.



"I think for me instantly I think about the pressure to say you want split time equally between parents or carers when you're asked what you want. The guilt is so prominent, not wanting to disappoint someone or make someone upset by speaking the truth. Sometimes split time is good, but a child should have the right to change that if it is not working for them."

"My change over day was midweek and if I had a choice when it was first initiated, I would have chosen a day that was easier, so I didn't have to take all my stuff to and from school."

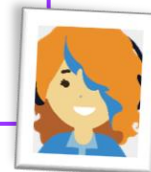


- When we share what we want from Family Time we would like professionals to help our family members respect this and help them to be consistent and reliable to minimise anxiety and disappointment.
- Your assessment of Family Time needs to consider the relationship between our parents and with extended family members who are important to us. There might be conflict in our families which can be very hard for us to manage so make sure there is a clear plan for how, where and when we will spend time with each of them. Remind our parents that arrangements are for our benefit and that their language and words and those used by extended family members needs to be kind about the arrangements and about others in our family. This includes about family members who might be supporting or supervising our time with a parent.



"I should not feel that there is a divide in my family or hear bad things said about my other parent".

"I don't want to be seen as on a parent's time and hear the phrase 'you're on Mums time now/Dad's time now' as I am the one having to move in between homes".



- Brothers and sisters may have different views about Family Time so please don't assume that we will want our arrangements to be the same. There will be differences in our relationships and experiences with our parents and it's therefore important that you explore this separately with each of us so that arrangements can be tailored to our individual needs.
- Don't forget to ask us about other significant family members, including brothers and sisters who may not be attending Family Time, and about our pets. They are important and being away from them might be upsetting and stressful for us. Ask us what would help to minimise this.
- We need you to check in with us and get feedback about how Family Time is progressing. This is so you can understand from us whether we feel safe, what is and isn't working and so you can consider with us what changes might need to be made. Don't forget to explore who else might have been present during our Family Time to be reassured that this doesn't include adults who might be a risk to us.
- Clearly explain your thinking throughout the time you are working with us as this might change. We need to understand your reasons for making recommendations and will want to know the exact details of our Family Time plan – where, when, for how long, who with? We will also want to know the practical arrangements, like how we will get to our other parent, what do we need to take, can we stay in touch with other family members, who can we contact if we are worried or scared and how do we do that safely? You should explain why any changes are made to the plan and what you are hoping will be gained for us from the arrangements; for example, are you hoping that our relationship will grow with a parent and is this also what we want?
- When making recommendations and decisions at the end of family court proceedings think about the future us. Family Time arrangements may be right for us when we are 6 for example, but not when we are 14. We need to know that there will be some 'wiggle room', with the potential for flexibility around arrangements as we get older and throughout the life of any court order. We'd like you to consider what will happen if things don't work out as planned and we are unhappy with and not benefiting from arrangements. We may not want those arrangements or to see a parent in the future and would like to see court orders made that enable us to have more control of these and our future lives.
- When you are ending your work with us, make sure that we know who we can reach out to for advice and support if needed in the future. Do your research, find out what support services are available to us, both in our local area and nationally. Talk to us about how these can help and provide us with the information, including the website address and contact details.

INDIRECT CONTACT

The things we've asked you to already consider also apply when you're thinking about 'indirect' contact.

We don't recognise any form of contact as 'indirect' because it still has a direct impact for us. We would prefer instead that you refer to 'indirect relationships' and 'indirect' or 'different' communication or just refer to the type of contact that it is, rather than just 'indirect'. Even if we're not seeing someone in person, communication with them (such as by a call or letter to our home) can feel intrusive.

Whilst 'indirect' would usually mean no face-to-face contact with a parent, in this increasingly digital world our experience is that other forms of communication are also referred to as indirect, such as through mobile phones, WhatsApp, Skype, FaceTime etc.



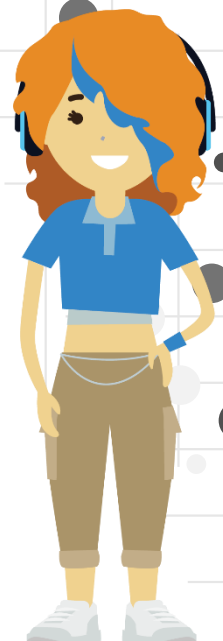
Please remember though that these types of digital contact are very much 'direct' and the reasons for recommending and arranging this for us needs to be carefully considered by you. With the right support, digital contact can be beneficial in helping us maintain a connection and relationship with a parent and for our sense of identity. However, telephone and video contact may not always be appropriate, such as when our parent has caused harm and because of the risk they might still present to us and our other parent's safety. Please think about what you hope to achieve for us when recommending these types of contact and how we, and our parent, can be supported with this.

We also want you to be clear with us about the purpose and benefit of letters and emails. Is it to help with our identity needs or is it a means of opening the door and / or keeping this open for contact in the future? How can we and our parents be supported to ensure this is meaningful for us?

Be clear with us what you mean by 'indirect' contact, and, if you are thinking about recommending this, be specific about how this will take place and ask whether this feels okay for us.

When a parent has hurt us, another child or our other parent, we want you to think about what form of contact and communication, if any, can be safe and comfortable for us. You will need to consider the type of hurt or harm we have experienced, the impact of this on each child within our family and our individual needs, vulnerabilities and resilience. You will need to know what kind of relationship we have had with our parent previously and what we might lose if this has been positive and beneficial. We know that these decisions are not easy; getting to know us and about our experiences, and asking what feels right and safe for us will help in your assessment about our future contact.

If we're living in a refuge or at another confidential address how can that be safe? The fear of a parent getting to know where we live and intruding our lives can be overwhelming. Receiving unwanted and unscheduled communication from that parent can be harassing, abusive and frightening and is a way of keeping control over and fear in our lives. When we have experienced domestic abuse or any other kind of harmful parenting think about how you keep identifying information safe and reduce that parent's control.



Other things we want you to consider when thinking about a parent's communication with us include: -

- ★ Our age and level of understanding and whether we can express a view about and agree to the communication.
- ★ Frequency of communication so that we are clear when to expect this. Be clear with our family members about what they should and shouldn't write in letters or say / not say in their calls with us. Where calls are agreed, we need these to be at a set time and not changed at the last minute.
- ★ Ask us whether we would feel more comfortable with phone or video calls. Video calls will not be right for us if we don't want to see and be seen by a parent and can also be used by the parent to show us inappropriate or upsetting things.
- ★ Help us to write a 'boundary list' that can be shared with our parent. This should make clear who we would be comfortable to hear or see on the phone or video call and things that we are comfortable or not comfortable to talk about, such as school, court proceedings and other family members. Ask us where we would like to be when we have the call and who we may want to have with or near us for support. We may not want to show anything that can be identified about our home so check whether we or our other parent knows how to add a background to the call.
- ★ Think about the duration of calls as, over time, conversations can be harder with a parent who we are not seeing regularly in person. Help them with ideas about how they can keep the communication simple, child-focused and fun and help us with some strategies for any awkward silences.

