

Contact & Emotional Support

A Guide for Foster & Kinship Carers

Why this resource?

For children in out-of-home care, family contact is not an optional extra; it is a core part of their identity, safety and emotional world. Even when contact is complex, inconsistent, or shaped by trauma, family relationships remain psychologically significant for the child. As a carer, you play a vital role in supporting the child through the full emotional arc of contact including the lead-up, the time during contact, and the transition back into everyday life within your care.



The importance of biological children & family connections

Children in care almost always stay emotionally connected to their family — even when those connections are complicated, inconsistent, or not talked about. These feelings can sit quietly in the background or show up through a child's behaviour, questions, or big emotions. Family connections play an important role in shaping how children understand themselves and their place in the world.

Staying connected to family can help children to:

- feel a sense of who they are and where they come from
- reduce worries about being forgotten or abandoned
- make sense of their story and why they are living in care
- stay connected to culture, language, spirituality, and community
- keep important relationships with siblings and extended family
- build protective relationships that may support them across their life.

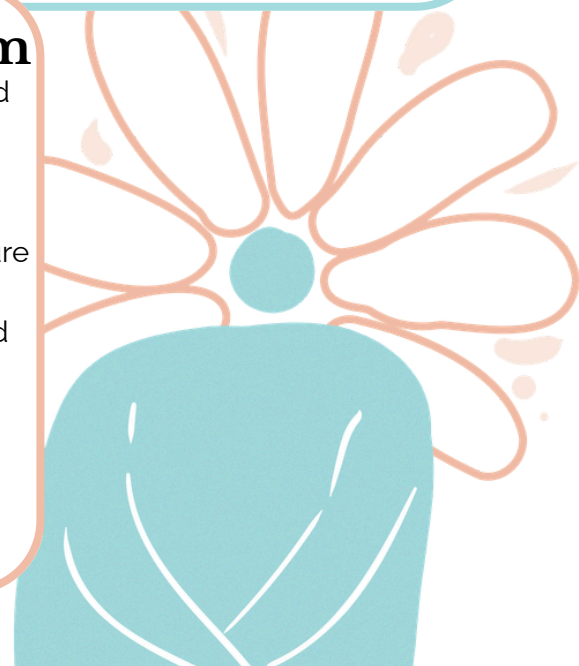
For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and for children from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, staying connected to culture and community is especially important. It supports wellbeing, strengthens identity, and is also a key part of safe, respectful care and legal responsibilities.

Communicating with the Care Team

- Share clear, factual observations about the child's behaviour and emotional responses.
- Keep the focus on what you see and notice in the child, rather than assumptions about adults.
- Report patterns over time, as these often give the clearest picture of what the child needs.
- Raise concerns early through your agency practitioner and Child Safety.

Examples

- "Ellie returned very distressed and took around two hours to settle."
- "Jai showed worry about upcoming contact and needed extra reassurance."



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Preparing for Contact

Preparation helps children feel safer around family contact. Predictability and emotional support make it easier for them to manage before, during, and after visits.

- Explain things in a way that matches the child's emotional and developmental level.
- Use simple, honest, neutral language that focuses on the child's experience.
- Build predictability by clearly outlining who will be there, where it will happen, how long it will last, how they'll get there, and what happens afterwards.
- Support regulation with small, familiar supports such as comfort items, visuals, or grounding strategies during transitions.

Try:

- "I'm here to help you get ready, and I'll be here when you come back."
- "Whatever comes up, we can work through it together."

Transitioning Home

Transitions are the most vulnerable times for children. A calm, predictable "landing routine" helps them settle after family contact.

- Keep the environment calm and low-demand, with familiar routines and regulation supports ready.
- Offer a warm, steady welcome without overwhelming the child.
- Let the child choose closeness or space, and hold boundaries gently and consistently.
- Watch for subtle signs of overwhelm, such as withdrawal, irritability, or regression.

Coming home can bring mixed feelings. Being a predictable, emotionally available presence helps the child feel safe, settle, and make sense of what they're carrying.

Distress about Contact

Distress after contact is common and does not mean the visit went badly. It reflects big feelings being activated in their nervous system.

Carers can help by:

- staying calm and grounded, as your steadiness supports the child
- naming what you see and normalising mixed feelings
- following the child's lead for space, closeness, play, or routine
- avoiding detailed questioning, which can increase pressure or loyalty conflict
- offering predictable, soothing routines after contact
- noting any concerns factually and sharing them with your agency if needed

Supporting non-physical contact

Children can benefit from staying connected to family in ways that don't rely on in-person visits, especially when visits are limited, inconsistent, or emotionally demanding.

Safe, meaningful ways to stay connected may include video or phone calls, voice messages, letters or emails, story recordings, photos or identity books, sharing artwork or updates, and cultural or community connections. These supports help keep a sense of connection and continuity for the child.

Further Reading & Resources

Child Mind Institute

<https://childmind.org/resources/>

Dan Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson –
The Whole-Brain Child