

Information leaflet

Birth family contact

Continuing to see immediate family can help a child living with a special guardian to build their resilience and develop a healthy sense of their own identity. Enabling a child to keep links with their birth family and to make sense of their own life history is often at the very heart of special guardianship.

For some special guardians managing birth family contact can be one of the most stressful aspects of their role. As roles change, birth parents can grieve both the loss of their child and their identity as their parent and children may feel torn by divided loyalties to different members of the family. Relationships can become highly emotive, complex and strained.

There are a number of questions and issues around contact that special guardians need to be aware of and consider in order to ensure the experience is the best it can be for everyone. Professionals can help special guardians to think these questions and issues through.

Why contact matters for a child

Contact arrangements are explicitly spelled out for some special guardians as part of their SGO and support plan while others are expected to make informal arrangements themselves. Special guardians are usually expected to supervise as well as arrange contact, although some initially receive support with this from their local authority.

The child's birth family is likely to always have a role in a child's life. Many children will think about them every day. Where there has been abuse and neglect these thoughts may be distressing yet their first family will remain a major part of a child's inner world and identity.

Contact can reassure children that their family members are alright and still care about them. It can help them process why they no longer live with them and come to terms with their past. It can also help them to continue to develop relationships with siblings and their wider family network which may be very important to them as they get older.

For special guardians, contact provides a chance to be in touch in a positive way with birth parents, sometimes reducing fear and insecurities.

For birth parents, contact can help them to feel reassured about the child's new situation and to acknowledge both their own bond with the child and the bond between the child and the special guardian. It may also help them to accept the court's decision about where and with whom the child should live.

The challenges of contact

Contact often takes place while birth parents are feeling overwhelmed, angry and struggling with other difficulties in their lives. As a result birth parents can be hostile, aggressive and unreliable and also very sad and emotional. Birth parents might repeatedly turn up late to contact, fail to turn up at all or try to increase contact beyond what has been agreed. They can struggle to accept that the situation is not temporary and that the special guardian is now their child's primary carer.

All this may leave the child feeling distressed, confused and undermine the new relationship and the stable life the carer is trying to build with them. Even when contact goes well they may be clingy, naughty, or aggressive after meetings, perhaps hitting out or wetting the bed or feeling resentful at having to leave their birth parents.

A child may show distress when parting from a parent due to their attachment. This is different from a child being re-traumatised by contact. As a special guardian gets to know the child and talk to them about their reaction to contact, they will be in a better position to judge how it affects them.

Professionals can help special guardians to stand back and realise just how confused the child's, birth parents' and indeed their own emotions may be through all of this and support them to develop strategies to work through these difficulties over time. Special guardians should try very hard not to criticise or blame either parent in front of the child but instead remain calm and as much in control of the situation as possible. There is good and bad in all of us and a special guardian's attitude towards birth parents is thought to directly affect the child's idea of who they are: inevitably children think of themselves as half mum, half dad. If they are not allowed to love them both they can end up rejecting a part of themselves.

Tensions can continue even when parents accept their changed role. Over time some parents lessen contact or withdraw completely leading children feeling confused and rejecting parents or yearning for them to return. Where children have emotional or behavioural difficulties the fall out from poor contact can make the overall situation worse and more stressful for everyone.

When birth parents' behaviour is not acceptable special guardians need the courage and confidence to be open and 'straight talking' with them. They should try to explain decisions by relating them back to what is best for the child. Due to distress or anger, birth parents may not hear what is being said and may need details including meeting arrangements explained more than once – special guardians need to try hard to be patient.

Special guardians who may not have anticipated these problems may find it difficult to make decisions on contact frequency, quality and safety and may feel obliged to continue contact in order to meet court-ordered arrangements. Decisions can be particularly challenging where birth parents have poor mental health, drug or alcohol issues or where special guardians do not trust the adults they keep company with. If a carer thinks contact is not working then they should discuss their social worker who will be able to support them.

Some special guardians will have to arrange and supervise more than one contact, as contact with mum, dad and siblings might need to take place at separate times in different locations.

This can be an added worry and strain but can be made easier if a routine is quickly established and the focus remains on what is important for the child.

Special guardians may also just be starting to settle the child, by building a connection and managing their own feelings about the loss of the future they had expected. If the carer is a relative of the birth parents they might feel sadness and guilt about the birth parent's past actions or current situation. Special guardians need support to understand and accept these difficult feelings and keep communication with birth parents clear and honest. The focus should always remain on what is best for the child.

Practical ways professional can help special guardians to manage contact

- Special guardians might find a written agreement useful either in a letter or email explicitly spelling out when and how contact takes place and what behaviour is considered appropriate. This helps establish clear ground rules.
- Special guardians should remember that contact does not always have to take place face-to-face. Telephone or contact by post (known as 'letterbox' contact) can also be beneficial. This is usually two-way or multi-way and can include siblings or other birth relatives. Children contribute according to their age and understanding. For this type of contact to work, special guardians and parents need to have the same commitment to it as face-to-face.
- Contact can also take place through Skype or social media however it can be difficult to stick to agreed times. Carers should refer parents back to contact agreements, ground rules and consequences and explain how this disrupts the child's regular routines and stability if they find things are slipping.
- If a special guardian has problems arranging contact, family mediation can sometimes be used to find a mutually agreed solution, such as identifying an alternative carer to supervise the contact meetings.
- Special guardians might find it useful to have a mobile number solely for messages involving contact arrangements. This will stop unwanted communications.
- Special guardians should try and give as much warning as possible if they have to change contact times and arrangements. If carers have to cancel a session they should try and ensure it takes place as soon as possible.
- If a birth parent and a child are struggling to work on their relationship special guardians can help by highlighting positives and things they have in common. For example they can say things like "you're lucky you have lovely dark hair like your dad" or "you're good at maths just like your mum".
- Having a plan for some quiet time or arranging another activity can help if the child is upset after contact or if contact has been cancelled.
- Grandparents and relatives sometimes feel more positive towards the birth parent that is on their side of the family, especially when parents separate. It is important for children's identity and development that special guardians support relationships with both parents and families whenever possible.

- Children of special guardians will find life story work useful. This gives children the opportunity to create a record of both their past and present using photos, mementos and letters. It can help with building their identity.

Key points

- Contact must always reflect what is in the best interests of the child.
- If special guardians can understand how the birth parent is feeling and recognise the loss they face – this can help avoid conflict and keep the focus on the child.
- Good communication is vital. Carers should try to be open and honest with parents about the benefits of sticking to contact arrangements for the child.

Useful links

Family Mediation council

www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk

Tel: 0192 0443 834

The Family mediation Council promotes best practice in family mediation to ensure families can confidently access high quality mediation services. Their website provides detailed information about the practicalities of mediation and also offers a local service finder.

Life Story Works

www.lifestoryworks.org

This website helps with ideas and techniques when constructing a life Story Book, including a step-by-step guide about how to make one.

National Family Mediation (NFM)

www.nfm.org.uk

Tel: 0300 4000 636

NFM delivers family mediation through affiliated members in over 500 locations across England and Wales. Their website explains how mediation works and provides a local service finder.

Family Action Head Office 24 Angel Gate, City Road, London, EC1V 2PT

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