

Information leaflet

Managing 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, managing birth family contact can be one of the most stressful aspects of special guardianship. 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 you need to be aware of and consider in order to ensure the experience is the best it can be for everyone.

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. They are expected to supervise as well as arrange contact, although some initially receive support with this from their local authority.

The child's birth family are 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 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.

They might repeatedly turn up late, fail to turn up at all or try to increase contact beyond what's 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 stable life you are 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 you get to know the child and talk to them about their reaction to contact, you'll be in a better position to judge how it affects them.

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 aren't 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 to 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 having the courage and confidence to be open and 'straight talking' works best. 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 – try hard to be patient.

Special guardians who may not have anticipated these difficulties 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 don't trust the adults they keep company with. If you think contact isn't working then you need to discuss this with a social worker who will be able to support you.

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 try and establish a routine as quickly as possible and keep a focus on what is important for the child.

Special guardians may also just be starting to settle the child, building a connection and managing their own feelings about the loss of the future they had expected. If you are a relative of the birth parents you might feel sadness and guilt about the birth parent's past actions or current

situation. Special guardians need to understand and accept these difficult feelings and keep communication with birth parents clear and honest. Keep the focus of decisions around contact on the child and what's best for them.

Practical ways to manage contact

- You 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.
- 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.
- Contact can also take place through Skype or social media however it can be difficult to stick to agreed times. Referring parents back to contact agreements, ground rules and consequences and explaining how this disrupts the child's regular routines and stability can help if you find things are slipping.
- If you have 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. If you think you need this sort of support talk to a social worker or see the useful links below about family mediation.
- You might find it useful to have a mobile number solely for messages involving contact arrangements. This will stop unwanted communications.
- Try and give as much warning as possible if you have to change contact times and arrangements. If you have to cancel a session try and ensure it takes place as soon as possible.
- If birth parent and a child are struggling to work on their relationship you can help by highlighting positives and things they have in common. For example you 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. You may feel tempted to criticise the parent but try hard not to do that – it won't help.
- Grandparents and relatives sometimes feel more positive towards the birth parent that is on their side of the family, especially when parents separate. It's important for children's identity and development to support their relationships with both parents and families whenever you can. Asking your partner or another family member to supervise contact can help.
- 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.
- Understanding how the birth parent is feeling and recognising the loss they face will help avoid conflict and keep the focus on the child.
- Good communication is vital. Try to be open and honest with parents about the benefits of sticking to contact arrangements for the child.
- Helping children create a narrative about their past and being open and truthful with them can help them feel secure in their new identity and life.

Useful organisations

Family Mediation Council

www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk

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/Life_Story_Works/HOME.html

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.

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