

Supporting children living in residential child care to build relationships with their family

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Find out more about how you can support the children you care for to build relationships with their family

An introduction to supporting children living in residential child care to build relationships with their family

For many young people, living close and staying connected to their birth family is something they take for granted. However, for children in the care system, relationships with their birth family are often restricted, dictated and controlled by other people.

How to support safe and appropriate family relationships

You should be clear with the young person about which family members they're allowed to see (including how they can see them) and help them to understand any restrictions.

Tell the local authority if:

- a young person has had unauthorised time with family members
- you have concerns around them spending time with family
- the young person wants to establish a new relationship.

Young people who don't have meaningful relationships with their family have the [right to access](#) an Independent Visitor. Independent Visitors can give

children an opportunity to have positive interactions with someone outside the network of professionals they usually meet. All local authorities should have access to this scheme.

Be positive and encouraging about family relationships

You must show an encouraging and positive attitude towards the relationships a young person has with their family. This can have a big impact on the quality of that relationship and the young person's ability to talk to you about it.

You should also try to form positive working relationships with the young person's family members and create a comfortable and welcoming environment when they visit the home.

Help the young person to remember important dates

You should help children to remember important days like family birthdays and religious and cultural occasions, for instance by supporting them to use diaries.

Take the time to talk with the young people about appropriate presents, cards and arrangements to attend celebrations. You could also help them make cards and gifts.

What does a positive family relationship look like?

Time spend between a young person and their family is positive when it is:

- safe
- beneficial
- consistent
- purposeful
- meaningful
- stimulating
- appropriate
- enjoyable.

Relationships and communicating between the young person and their family can take many forms:

- speaking on the phone
- texting
- social media, for instance Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp
- letters
- face-to-face time.

The relationships and communications may be supervised or unsupervised.

It's important to remember that supervised meetings involve a third person directly observing interactions between parent and child. Both parties will likely find this a strange and difficult experience.

Advice about support before, during and after family time

When a child communicates with their family you may see them behaving in an unusual way, as they process what's going on. You should identify the best person to provide the young person with emotional and practical support before, during and after family time.

Before family time:

- never force the young person to see their family if they don't want to
- never use family relationships as a bartering tool to manage difficult behaviour in a child; appreciate that difficult behaviour may be an expression of how they're feeling
- have an encouraging and positive attitude towards the young person's family
- identify the best person to take the child to spend time with their family.

During family time:

It it's you who's supervising the time:

- make sure you know the young person's circumstances
- know what's expected of the birth family and what's expected of you
- know what the family have been told about what's expected of them
- know what to do if things don't go to plan; this is essential to ensure the safety of everyone and promote positive meetings.

After family time:

- identify which support strategies will help the young person after their time with family
- identify who's the best person to support them
- be aware that if the child is distressed it may not mean the visit was a negative experience; it could reflect that they miss and love their family. This is important, as your interpretations will influence what information is

recorded about their relationship.

Useful resources

[Our work to support children who are looked after](#)

[Our chosen or 'curated' research about the number who are looked after](#)

[Supporting positive relationships for children and young people who have experience of care](#)