Family contact for children and young people in out-of-home care

Practice Paper

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Introduction

Most children and young people in out-of-home care want family contact. Recent Australian research, presenting the views of children and young people, has confirmed earlier findings showing that a majority want some type of contact, with many children and young people wanting more contact than current arrangements provide (Barber and Gilbertson 2001; Community Services Commission 2000; Johnson et al 1995; Mason & Gibson 2004).

After reviewing empirical literature and practice policy, Australian researchers Barber and Gilbertson, recently concluded that it is reasonable to promote parental visits for children in care “wherever possible…” (2001). This conclusion is consistent with the provisions of the Child Protection Act 1999, section 87, which requires departmental officers to provide opportunity for family contact for children under assessment or child protection orders, where the chief executive is granted custody or guardianship.

Similarly, the Child Protection Act 1999, section 80 requires (for children under child protection orders) that family members and other persons provide opportunity for family contact, unless otherwise directed by the Childrens Court.

For Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander children, the recognised agency for the child, must be given the opportunity to participate in decision making (including decision-making about contact) for the child (Child Protection Act 1999, section 6).

Positive family contact that meets the emotional needs of a child or young person is heavily reliant upon the commitment, knowledge and skills of child protection departmental officers. To make and implement good decisions about family contact, departmental officers need to work from a framework that gives them an understanding of:

- what family contact is
- why family contact is important for children in out-of-home care
- the purpose of family contact
- key practice principles.

Family contact is a critical area of practice for any departmental officer who:

- works with a child or young person placed away from home with parental consent
- removes a child or young person from their family home without parental consent
- works with a child or young person under an assessment order with custody provisions
- works with a child or young person subject to a child protection order granting custody or guardianship to the chief executive.

What is family contact

**Family contact is ‘family’ contact.**

‘Family’ contact is often interpreted in practice as ‘parental’ contact. When planning contact it is important to remember that children and young people in care may benefit emotionally from contact with a range of family members – siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins – as well as other people important to their family, community or culture, such as elders, family friends
and neighbours. There is strong support for the use of contact in maintaining sibling relationships, which research positively associates with child well-being and adult functioning (Ainsworth and Maluccio 2002; Hegar 1988; Hegar and Scannapieco 1999; O’Neill 2002).

**Family contact does not only refer to visits**

Children and young people now have access to a range of mediums that allow them direct or indirect contact with family members, such as:

- visits
- telephone calls
- SMS messages
- letters
- email.

In some circumstances audiotape or video conferencing technology may also be available and appropriate to facilitate family contact.

For many children contact and communication with family members at any particular time may involve a few of these mediums, for example, a child may visit with their parents and siblings, have regular telephone contact with them and be encouraged to write letters to their grandparents living interstate.

**Why is family contact important**

Making and implementing arrangements for family contact can involve practical and emotional challenges for families, carers and departmental officers. Understanding exactly why family contact is important for children and young people supports departmental officers to maintain a focus on the child’s needs in case planning and decision-making, when situations are complex or confusing.

Research suggests that well-planned and positive family contact can benefit children and young people by:

- assisting with family reunification - there is a widely reported association between the frequency and reliability of family contact and children returning home or spending less time in placement (Ainsworth and Maluccio 1998; Barber and Gilbertson 2001)
- maintaining/building attachment and connectedness with family and other significant people – children and young people in out-of-home care have identified that the maintenance of relationships based on familiarity and “something in common” is of key importance to them, with these connections meeting their emotional needs for love, a sense of belonging, stability and continuity (Mason and Gibson 2004). Schedule 1 of the Child Protection Act 1999, the Charter of Rights for a Child in Care, establishes the maintenance of family and community relationships as a right for children in placement. Similarly, section 122, the Statement of Standards, requires those involved in caring for children to encourage them to maintain family and other significant relationships. Research into resilience promotes the idea of departmental officers ‘valuing relationships that the child values’ and working to develop these as a source of support and belonging for the child that will continue throughout their childhood and adult life (Gilligan 2001).
Research demonstrates that sibling relationships are of critical importance here (Hegar and Scannapieco 1999)

- promoting child well-being and development – research has established a connection between parental contact and child well-being, self-esteem and positive identity development (Cantos, Gries and Slis 1997; Fanshel and Shinn 1978; Salahu-Din and Bollman 1994).

**Purpose of family contact**

The first thing to consider when making decisions about family contact arrangements is: “what purpose will the contact serve for the individual child or young person?”. Departmental officers are often familiar with the well-established connection between family contact and reunification, however, research and practice wisdom also suggests that family contact can help fulfil a child’s emotional needs, even where reunification is not viable. In addition to assisting with reunification, family contact can help with:

- maintaining, building and developing relationships important to the child or young person to provide support, continuity and a sense of belonging
- assessment of parent-child interactions and relationship, and parenting skills and capacity
- opportunities for intervention, education and modelling of specific skills and abilities, for example, parenting skills, behaviour management, communication skills and learning how to play.

The specific purpose/s of contact for a particular child can and will change over time, dependent upon the child’s emotional and developmental needs, their wishes and circumstances and those of their family and carers.

Decision-making about the purpose/s of family contact for a particular child should never ‘stand alone’ – it must always be congruent with the overall goal of the case plan, and must be regularly reviewed.

**For example:**

Shay is 6 years old and subject to a 2 year child protection order. She has been in out-of-home care for the last 18 months. At the last family meeting departmental officers discussed with her family the need to conduct an assessment to determine how best to meet Shay’s long-term care needs, including the possibility of family reunification. This assessment has now commenced.

Shay currently sees her parents and little sister twice a week. One day a week Shay’s mother walks her home from school and they have afternoon tea at home. Shay has a bit of a play and then has an early dinner with her family before going back to her carer. Every couple of weeks Shay’s departmental officer comes along for a couple of hours on this visit to have a look at how these visits are going and to see Shay with her family. Shay also now spends one morning on the weekend with her family and they generally go on some sort of outing – to the park or the shops. Shay’s maternal grandmother joins them on these outings, which Shay always enjoys. Shay’s mother has also just started helping Shay with reading in her classroom one day a week. These arrangements are to be reviewed at the next family meeting.
These contact arrangements are primarily directed at maintaining Shay’s relationships with significant family members and preserving her sense of belonging. They also provide the opportunity for Shay’s departmental officer to assess her relationships with her family, with the potential for the departmental officer to provide input on parenting skills, communication and behaviour management, if desirable. Both these purposes fit well with current case plan, as they are useful in determining whether reunification is possible, and will meet Shay’s long-term care needs.

Practice principles

Research demonstrates that departmental officers have a critical role in making contact happen (Fernandez 1996; Hess and Proch 1993). For contact to occur and work well for the child or young person, departmental officers must:

- maintain a commitment to family contact
- coordinate decision-making, planning and regular review of arrangements
- monitor arrangements to ensure they continue to meet the child’s needs and to actively ‘trouble-shoot’ any difficulties that arise.

When departmental officers come together with families, carers, children and young people to consider family contact, there are five key practice principles that should be used to guide decision-making:

1. **Family contact is about the best interests of the child or young person**

Child-centred practice means that any arrangements for family contact must focus on meeting the needs of the individual child or young person. Central to this, for any child in out-of-home care are their needs for love, a sense of belonging, physical and emotional safety, their developmental need and individual needs that arise from their history and circumstances (such as from the harm they have previously suffered, their experiences of removal, separation and placement, grief and loss). These help determine key decisions such as:

- who is involved in contact with the child or young person
- the purpose of contact
- the type of contact (visits, letters, phone calls etc)
- whether contact is supervised or unsupervised
- the frequency of all types of contact and the duration of contact visits
- the venue for visits and what activities are planned.

For example:

Shay felt very close to her grandmother. Her worker believed that this relationship made Shay feel safe and happy and that contact could be used to actively support this relationship for her sense of security and belonging, now and in the future. In addition to the weekend visits, Shay’s worker encouraged her grandmother to phone her midweek at her carer’s house and asked the carer to support Shay in feeling comfortable to initiate phone calls with her grandmother at any time.

This does not mean that the needs or wishes of parents, other family members and carers around family contact should not be considered. Recognising and meeting the needs and wishes of
family and carers, where possible, will resource and support them to meet the needs of the child or young person. However where the needs of adults are in conflict or competition with the child’s interests then decision-making must favour the child’s needs and interests, both in the short and long-term.

**For example:**
Shay’s carer was concerned about family contact increasing to include a weekend visit. She felt apprehensive about unsupervised weekend contact in case anything went wrong for Shay as the departmental officer would not be available on the weekend “and it’s a long time till Monday with an upset kid”. Transport was also an issue on Saturday’s due to existing commitments for other children in her care. The carer thought that contact should not change.

Shay’s departmental officer took time to explore the carer’s concerns and discussed why she thought contact should go ahead. They agreed to a plan where the carer could discuss any concerns immediately after the visit with Crisis Care workers. The departmental officer also encouraged the carer to meet Shay’s mother over a cup of coffee, hoping that a little knowledge of each other would help allay concerns. Shay’s departmental officer recognised that it was expecting too much of the carer to accommodate additional transport responsibilities at present and made other arrangements for transporting Shay to and from the visits.

2. **The physical and emotional safety of the child or young person is a priority**
The child’s physical and emotional safety is a priority when making arrangements for family contact. In particular, a child’s need for safety influences decisions about:

- who the child has contact with
- what type of contact occurs
- whether contact is supervised or unsupervised
- where contact visits are held
- the duration of contact visits, the time of day they occur, and what activities are engaged in.

A realistic assessment of the nature and degree of any risks to the child’s physical or emotional safety from family contact can only be obtained by:

- listening to what the child or young person says about how they feel about contact with particular people. Be aware that their views and opinions may only emerge over time in the context of a trusted relationship
- seeking the views and opinions of those people close to the child or young person, for example family members, carers, friends and other professionals such as teachers and therapists
- speaking with people who have observed the child or young person’s behaviour and interactions with their family members, for example carers, other family members, teachers and therapists
- liaising with carers about a child’s behaviour before, during and after any type of family contact
- liaising with people who have transported the child or young person to and from contact and who have supervised the contact for the child
• reviewing file material for relevant history.

Where a child or young person is adamant that they feel unsafe but cannot or will not explain why so that this can be addressed, or where they display extreme distress and refuse to participate in contact arrangements, then contact should cease (at least temporarily) while departmental officers thoroughly assess the situation.

Thorough and comprehensive assessment is critical as sometimes a child or young person’s distress about contact may not necessarily be about safety – it may be connected to developmental issues or stresses associated with the placement experience such as separation anxiety, grief and loss, or loyalty conflicts.

Where contact ceases for this assessment to occur (the chief executive refuses to allow, restricts or imposes conditions on family cont), the Child Protection Act 1999, section 87(3) requires departmental officers to give written notice to each person affected by the decision. In a situation where visits are stopped, a child or young person may feel comfortable with more indirect forms of contact and these possibilities should be considered while visits are ‘on hold’.

Decisions to cease, restrict or impose conditions upon contact, even temporarily, can be very distressing for a child’s family and this grief and disappointment may manifest as anger towards the departmental officers, the carers or even sometimes the child. It is important that departmental workers recognise this, attempt to process these issues with the family and persist in keeping communication lines open - while taking any precautions necessary for the safety of the child, carers and themselves.

3. Planning and decision-making should occur in collaboration with children, young people, their families and carers to the full extent possible

Research suggests that where the parties involved in family contact have been actively involved in planning and decision-making, and feel that their views and opinions have been listened to, then contact plans are more likely to work (Neil and Howe 2004). Where participants in contact feel little ownership of the plans or do not feel that their needs are being met or even considered, then the plans are less likely to be adhered to. This principle is consistent with best practice in broader case planning and case management. While it is seldom possible to make plans that fit perfectly with the needs of all parties involved in contact, the experience of having views and wishes actively sought and listened to can build good will and allow for more positive problem-solving processes. It is particularly important that departmental officers develop their capacity to seek the views and wishes of children and young people in a developmentally appropriate way by using the range of strategies listed under principle 2 (above).

In addition, legislative requirements must be met with respect to deciding family contact for Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander children (Child Protection Act 1999, section 6).

4. Regular review of family contact decisions and arrangements is important

Decisions and arrangements about family contact must be regularly reviewed to ensure that the child or young person’s needs remain the focus and are actually being met. Remember that a child’s needs don’t remain static – they change over time according to age and developmental stage, particular incidents or events, the general circumstances of the child or young person, their family and their placement.
5. All plans and arrangements for family contact should be documented

Research shows that documenting family contact agreements makes it more likely that contact will occur (Neil and Howe 2004; Proch and Howard 1986). Where each party involved in contact has a documented copy of agreements, it is less likely that confusion in implementing the plans will occur – and where any difficulties do emerge, having a documented record may help in sorting out the issues.

Contact when a child or young person is placed away from home with parental consent

Placements with parental consent may occur during an investigation and assessment or where a child is subject to an intervention with parental agreement case. These placements, may last for a few weeks or a few months and in some circumstances may precede an application for an order with custody provisions.

Departmental officers who make and support these placements must consider a child’s needs for contact and work towards meeting these needs. Children and young people placed with parental consent have similar needs for belonging, security and relationship, to those placed under child protection orders. While the consensual nature of the placement means that contact is legally free from any restrictions, it is valuable for the departmental officer to engage with parents and carers to ensure some type of contact actually occurs, even where the placement only lasts for a few weeks. A clear understanding of the child’s need explains why this is important. This work then assumes critical importance where these placements are extended for a period of time or where they lead to an application for an order with custody provisions.

Contact at the time of removal from home

Removing a child or young person from their family without parental consent usually involves a highly emotional crisis situation. Research suggests that this is a critical time for departmental officers to actively reach out and sustain the connection between child and parent ((Hess and Proch 1993, Fernandez 1996). Safe contact soon after removal can be vital to maintaining this connection. It is also helpful in reassuring parents and children, who may both be feeling frightened, bewildered, guilty and sad. The younger a child is at the time of removal, the greater the need for contact as soon as possible following removal (Hess and Proch 1993). A young child’s attachment is far more fragile than that of an older child. A departmental officer’s failure to engage families in contact at the time of removal may actually contribute to the failure of contact down the track 13 (Fernandez 1996).

Supervision of contact may be useful at this time for both safety and assessment purposes.

Contact when a child or young person is subject to a short-term child protection order granting custody or guardianship

At this stage of ongoing intervention, no decision may yet have been made about the best way of meeting the child’s long-term needs. Work with the child and family will be leading up to this
decision, which means that aside from helping to maintain relationships, contact may assist in assessing the viability of reunification.

Key practice questions during this stage often revolve around issues such as:

- what amount, frequency or type of contact is appropriate?
- when should supervised contact move to being unsupervised?
- when should overnight contact be introduced?

There is no set formula for answering these questions. In making decisions about these issues departmental officers must individually assess the situation for each and every child, considering key factors such as:

- the child’s age and developmental stage
- the child’s wishes, feelings and views
- the reasons for the child’s being placed in out-of-home care
- the history of each parent’s involvement in care-giving for the child (for example, one parent may have been the sole carer, while the other has never lived with the child and only had sporadic involvement in their life prior to the child’s entry to care)
- the child’s daily routine
- the parental and carer capacity and circumstances
- any concerns about the child’s physical and emotional safety.

Contact when a child or young person is subject to a long-term child protection order

At this stage of ongoing intervention it has been decided that reunification is not to occur and that a child’s long-term care needs will be met by an out-of-home placement. In these circumstances family contact may still be critical in helping to meet a child’s needs for belonging, relationship, identity and connectedness. Placement stability is often an issue for children and young people who remain in out-of-home care on a long-term basis. Where contact is used to nurture ongoing relationships with family members, these relationships may prove to be a key source of continuity for children and young people in long-term out-of-home care. Recent Australian research has revealed that continuity of relationships over time is highly valued by children in care (Mason and Gibson 2004).

Again there is no set formula for which family members a child in long-term care maintains contact with, or the frequency, duration or type of contact this may involve. Key factors to consider in this assessment, in addition to those listed in the section above are:

- which family members does the child wish to continue a relationship with and for what reasons?
- what role could different family members continue to play in the child’s life now and into the future?

These factors need to be considered in collaboration with the child, their family, their carers and, for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child, the recognised agency for the child. If a child enters long-term out-of-home care at a relatively young age, their need and desire for contact
with different family members may change over time, for example, around the age of 13 or 14 when developmental tasks to do with identity and autonomy emerge, or leading up to a young person’s transition from care.

The capacity for family contact to continue to meet the emotional needs of children in long-term out-of-home care is largely dependent upon constructive working relationships being established between families and carers. This, in turn, is heavily reliant upon departmental officer investment in brokering and trouble-shooting these relationships, from when children first enter out-of-home care.

Supervised contact

Supervised contact may be useful in meeting different purposes at any stage of casework – its usefulness is not limited to the early stages after a child has been removed from home. Supervision of contact is most commonly associated with ensuring the safety of a child, and under the Child Protection Act 1999 may be court-ordered for this purpose. However, it may also be needed for:

- assessment purposes
- intervention and input (for example, education, modelling of behaviour and parenting skills).

Where contact is to be supervised for safety reasons it is preferable that, in addition to being able and willing to protect the child during contact, the supervisor already knows the child and the child feels safe with them. One of the most common mistakes made in supervising contact is an ‘adult-centric’ approach that doesn’t attend to how safe a child feels. A child will always feel more comfortable with a known adult and will feel safer with an adult with whom they have developed a trusting relationship.

The purpose of contact is always about meeting the child’s needs and promoting a positive and enjoyable experience. To facilitate this, it is useful for the supervisor to meet the family members involved in supervised contact with the child prior to the first contact. This allows the supervisor to ‘break the ice’ away from the child’s presence and gives the family and supervisor time to discuss their expectations of what the contact will be like, and what the supervisor’s role will involve.

Contact between the child and family is required to be supervised when:

- there are safety concerns for the child
- there is a legitimate concern that the child might be abducted
- the child or family have requested the CSO be present
- a qualified professional recommends that contact be supervised
- there is need to assess interactions between the child and the family
- the CSO is working is a therapeutic capacity with the child and the family.

Foster carers may participate in family contact arrangements where both of the following apply:

- cases are reasonably straightforward and do not require a high level of control
- there are no significant concerns regarding removal or abduction of the child or aggressive behaviour by the parents.
Staff of licensed care services or funded non-government organisations, whether licensed or not licensed, may participate in family contact arrangements, for example, to:

- facilitate contact between the child and the family, where the relationship is strained or contact has been minimal
- offer support and security for the child where the child has a fear of the family
- develop a relationship of trust with the family
- transport children in out of home care to family contact

An employee (paid or volunteer) of a licensed care service who is involved in transporting or supervising a child must have a blue card or a current exemption notice (which is issued to police and teachers) and a positive suitability check following a personal history screening by the Central Screening Unit (CSU).

The personal history screening undertaken by the CSU includes checks for:

- criminal, traffic and domestic violence history interstate and New Zealand
- child protection history within Queensland.

All Child Safety funded non-government organisations, whether licensed or not licensed (for example services such as Recognised Entities, Family Intervention Services, Counselling and Intervention Services) are required to comply with the *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000* as a condition of their funding, as stated in the Service Agreement (Part B) Specific Terms of Funding for Child Safety Services, Clause 1(a):

“If the provisions of the *Child Protection Act 1999* or the *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000* apply to the activities carried out by You as part of the Services, You must comply with those provisions.”

Contractual arrangements with external parties engaged in undertaking transport and/or supervision of children in care for family contact must ensure that the person has:

- a positive blue card (and where possible, that the person has undergone personal history screening)
- knowledge and skills in working with families, children and young people
- ability to deal with client matters of a sensitive and confidential nature – parties would be required to sign an oath of confidentiality witnessed by departmental staff
- sound interpersonal and written skills, ability to liaise with clients, government and a variety of cultures
- awareness that they may be required to give evidence in legal procedures including the Children’s Court or Queensland Civil Administrative Tribunal
- a ‘C’ class driver’s licence
- knowledge of, or ability to quickly gain the knowledge of, the current child restraint laws in Queensland
- a mobile phone to enable contact with departmental staff should an emergency arise
- for transporting children, a registered vehicle that has either comprehensive or third party vehicle insurance. The insurance must also indemnify the department against certain liabilities at law
• agreed to provide timely written details about their observations, including any concerns that may have arisen.

Deciding to restrict or refuse family contact

While most children in out-of-home care desire some type of contact with members of their family, contact sometimes carries a level of risk for a child’s physical and/or emotional safety. These risks may be related to the reasons for the child’s entry to out-of-home care or may be connected to behaviour linked to the emotional stresses of the placement experience. They may pose a threat to a child’s safety during contact or as a result of contact.

When assessing the level and degree of risk associated with family contact and appropriate responses to manage or minimise this, departmental officers must go back to considering the key question of “what is the purpose of contact for this particular child at this point in time”? This will help determine issues central to child safety such as:

• which family members should the child have contact with? Should this be one-on-one contact or should it be a group situation with more than one family member? Should the child’s departmental officer or another trusted adult formally supervise contact?

• what type of contact is appropriate with different family members? Are direct or indirect forms of contact more appropriate with a particular family member?

• how can contact visits be structured to support the child and avoid places, situations or behaviour that makes them feel unsafe? For example:
  • visit venue - try to ensure that the venue is familiar to the child, feels safe and is comfortable for the visit activities
  • visit duration - the time of day the visit is held
  • visit activities - are they safe, enjoyable and interesting for the child
  • use of structured transition points - plan ‘rituals’ for starting and ending visits that will help children and their family to manage these transitions.

Other strategies that departmental officers can employ to safeguard the child and promote a positive contact experience include:

• spending time preparing the child for contact and talking through their feelings with them after the contact. This may include developing some ‘action plans’ to be activated if the child signals during a visit or telephone call that they feel uncomfortable or unsafe

• spending time preparing family members for contact, helping them to structure activities for visits that are focussed on the comfort and safety of the child, discussing behaviours that are not acceptable during visits or phone calls because of their negative impact upon the child and talking through their feelings after any form of contact

• encouraging carers to share any concerns about contact with the departmental officer so that these can be explored, assessed and addressed. Research suggests that carer anxiety about family contact can influence the child or young person’s level of comfort about family contact and can sometimes contribute to them feeling unsafe or uncomfortable with visits (Edelstein et al 2001; Neil and Howe 2004). It is often useful for departmental officers to also spend time with carers preparing them for contact and checking in with them afterwards, giving them information about how the contact went
• undertaking early ‘troubleshooting’ action when there are signs of hostility or conflict between parents and carers. Left unchecked this situation can create loyalty conflicts for children, which can affect their feelings of safety and comfort about family contact.

Where the level of risk to a child’s emotional or physical safety is such that contact with a particular family member must cease, this is unlikely to be a ‘forever decision’. While it is sometimes the case that contact with a particular family member poses an unacceptable risk for a child for the duration of their childhood, this is not common.

It is important to remember that risks to a child’s physical and/or emotional safety from family contact may increase or decrease over time dependent upon factors such as their age and developmental stage and changes to the circumstances and behaviour of their family members. Departmental officers need to monitor and regularly review a child’s safety in relation to family contact.

Where contact must cease with a particular family member, consider if contact with other family members can be useful in meeting a child’s needs for belonging, identity and continuity.

Practice tips

Research and practice wisdom suggests a few practice tips for departmental officers keen to promote the capacity of family contact to meet a child’s needs.

**Practice Tip**

Spend time brokering relationships between children, their family members and their carers. Constructive working relationships between these parties will make the child’s life easier, promote more flexibility in contact arrangements and assist in smoothing practical and emotional challenges. At the very least, departmental officers should try to ensure that parents and carers have met and spoken with each other. Where possible have parents and carers meet prior to, or away from, the first contact visit with a child following placement in out-of-home care.

**Practice Tip**

It is particularly important that departmental officers help to develop relationships between the carers of different members of a sibling group so that ongoing sibling contact is more easily and naturally facilitated.

**Practice Tip**

Consider the purpose of the contact when structuring visit activities. For example, where one of the reasons for contact for a young child is to strengthen the parent-child relationship then visit activities may focus on showing the parent how to play with the child and practise
developmentally appropriate behaviour management. Where visits are supervised for safety reasons, there may be the capacity for the supervisor to support the parent in activities that help to strengthen their attachment to their child – which may also help in addressing the identified safety issues.

**Practice Tip**

Build contact visits into the daily rhythm and flow of a child’s life as much as is possible given the child’s needs for safety, for example, parents taking the child to sporting commitments, helping in the child’s classroom, taking the child shopping to buy a birthday present for a sibling or for a haircut. This works to strengthen the connection between the child’s daily life and their family, supports family members to take on particular tasks with their child, helps to provide some structure and activities for visits and may even reduce some of the demands upon the child’s carer. This approach is also useful for long-term out-of-home care situations where regular or frequent contact is possible.

**Practice Tip**

Consider the child or young person’s developmental needs when scheduling the frequency, duration and time of contact visits and when planning visit activities. The child’s age and stage of development affects key factors such as:

- the fragility or strength of their attachment and the frequency, level or type of contact required to build this
- their concentration span, communication capacity and interests
- their daily routine (for example, for young children, regular snacks and sleep times may be important while young people may be juggling school/training, part-time work and social/recreational commitments).

**Practice Tip**

Visits that fit within a child’s daily routine, along with developmentally appropriate activities will result in a more enjoyable visit for all concerned. Visit activities that developmentally challenge a child, like learning to ride a bike, may help parents to feel that they are making a positive contribution to their child’s well-being.

**Practice Tip**

Reach out early to parents and other family members if contact plans are not being adhered to. Try to find out what the reasons are for this. Remember that feelings of guilt, shame and sadness are often behind overt displays of anger and hostility, while feelings of
hopelessness and despair can contribute to parents starting to miss visits. Sometimes parents feel it is just too hard to face their child without being able to take them home. Feelings of loss and grief can result in parents continually promising their child when they see them at visits that they will be coming home soon even when this doesn’t fit with case plan goal. Other families find it hard to admit that financial circumstances limit their capacity to maintain contact.

**Practice Tip**

Accept that some parents will always be unreliable with contact arrangements. Avoid getting too ‘hung up’ on this - help the child and their carers understand that being unreliable doesn’t necessarily equate with being uncaring. Promote flexibility where possible in these situations to prevent the child being penalised, for example: if a parent missed a visit yesterday, upsetting and disappointing their child, then don’t rebuff the parent when they present today seeking a visit – do what you can to make a visit happen for the child and sort through the issues with the parent separately from this.

**Conclusion**

Family contact is an essential area of practice for any departmental officer involved in working with children and young people in out-of-home care. A key message for departmental officers is to ensure that they employ an individualised approach to decision-making – one that considers the unique needs and circumstances for each and every child.
Reference list


