

- Circumstances/availability of foster carers; consideration needs to be taken of the birth children of the foster family, i.e. afterschool activities etc.

Access should be regularly reviewed as part of the child's Care Plan.

Note: *Text messaging is not an acceptable form of communication when organising or notifying foster carers or social workers of changes in access arrangements.*

If at any time you feel the access plan is not working for you or if your family circumstances change making it difficult for you to comply with access arrangements, you should:

- Contact the child's social worker and your own link worker to inform them as soon as possible.
- Discuss possible alternative arrangements being very clear about your availability or non-availability to fulfil access.

Payments associated with Access:

Foster carers are not required to pay the costs associated with access such as payments to birth parents or for venue. They are, however, expected to transport the child to and from access visits, where it is possible and appropriate to do so. Foster Carers are encouraged to ensure, where appropriate, that their foster child has some small monies for their own use when attending access. (Taken from the HSE 'Guidance on the use of foster care allowance')

Supervised Access:

Where access is supervised, the reasons for this are explained carefully to the child, the birth family and foster carers and recorded on the case file. The child and family social worker consults with them about how the supervision can be managed in the least intrusive manner consistent with the need to safeguard the child. The decision to supervise access is subject to regular review.

At all times where supervision of access is required this is the responsibility of the child and family social worker, child care worker or access worker.

Note: *It is not the role or responsibility of the foster carer to supervise access.*



Irish Foster Care Association

Access helps a child manage any impact of being separated from his family and home environment and to maintain relationships with sibling(s), and other family members (or others who have a significant emotional relationship with the child) when appropriate.

ACCESS

An Information Leaflet on Access
for General/Relative Foster Carers



Please contact the IFCA office for further details on any of the above.

Irish Foster Care Association,

Unit 23, The Village Green, Tallaght, Dublin 24

Tel: 01 4599 474 info@ifca.ie www.ifca.ie



Irish Foster Care Association

The term 'foster carer' throughout this leaflet refers to all individuals and families involved in foster care in Ireland, be it general, relative, emergency, day, respite, private, high support or other forms of foster care. Areas of particular relevance to relative carers are noted throughout the sections.

The terms 'Access' and 'Contact' are interchangeable in terms of foster care; for the purpose of this leaflet the term used will be 'Access'.

At the time of printing the process of setting up a Child & Family Agency separate from the HSE is underway; for the purpose of this leaflet the terms Health Board, HSE and Child & Family Agency are interchangeable.

Definition:

The National Standards for Foster Care, 2003 define **Access** as the meeting of children in care with their families and others who are significant figures in their lives and **Contact** as the arrangements made in order for children to keep in touch with their families and significant others from whom they are separated.

Traditionally, access is seen as meaning visits for children with their birth families whereas contact is a much broader concept including exchange of cards/letters/photos/telephone contact/sharing of school reports/etc.

Legislation:

The Child Care Act, 1991 directs that the Child & Family Agency shall 'facilitate reasonable access to the child by his parents, any person acting in loco parentis, or any other person who, in the opinion of the board, has a bona fide interest in the child and such access may include allowing the child to reside temporarily with any such person.'

Standard 2 of the National Standards for Foster Care, 2003, states that 'children and young people in foster (relative) care are encouraged and facilitated to maintain and develop family relationships and friendships.'

The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995, Section 16. (2). (g) lists as a duty of foster (relative) carers that they shall 'co-operate with the health board (Child & Family Agency) in facilitating access to the child by a parent or other person who is allowed such access.'

A general foster carer is a person who having completed a process of assessment and training is placed on a panel of approved foster carers to care for children in care of the State in accordance with the Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995, and the Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations, 1995. Foster carers provide a service to the Child & Family Agency or Private Fostering Agencies.

A relative carer is a person who is a friend, neighbour or relative of a child or a person with whom the child or the child's family has had a relationship prior to the child's admission to care and who is taking care of that child on behalf of and by agreement with the Child & Family Agency, having completed or, having agreed to undertake a process of assessment within 12 weeks of a child being placed for approval as a relative carer in accordance with the Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations, 1995.

Access:

Access is not limited to the child's parents; children in care should have on-going access with siblings and extended family members who have a bone fide interest in the child, bearing in mind at all times if the access is in the best interest of the child.

The Child & Family Agency has the primary duty to facilitate access to the family or other persons to whom the child is closely connected. As a foster carer, one of your primary roles is to support and encourage a young person to maintain family links and friendships. When you foster a child carers must accept the child's genetic inheritance, family history and his/her experiences before they come into care as well as the continuing relationship between the child and his/her family.

Ideally some access with the child's family should take place within the foster home unless there are clear reasons why this cannot occur. It is important for families to see and have a sense of the home their child resides in and likewise it is important for the child to be comfortable in sharing this with their family.

As a carer you need to be aware that children/young people living in foster care may experience some feelings of guilt and/or anxiety in relation to family access, they may experience a sense of divided loyalties and therefore social workers and foster carers should spend time ensuring that family access is as positive an experience as possible for the child/young person.

The Child & Family Agency is legally obliged to ensure Court ordered access is carried out; failure to do so would result in the HSE being in contempt of court. In rare circumstances a Court may order a foster carer to carry out access, failure on the part of the carer to comply with the access arrangements could result in the foster carer being in contempt of court, if this is the case please talk to your link worker and the child's social worker.

Relative Carers: The majority of children in relative care are living within their extended family. Access often happens in a natural way for the relative child with parents coming to the house or relative carers bringing the child to their parents' house. Visits to and from other family members can happen spontaneously or are planned as part of the regular family routine. Informal arrangements often work very well for the relative carers, parents and the child.

At times access can be challenging for relative carers, parents and children due to on-going difficulties between carer and parents. If this is the case for you then access needs to be more formal and supported and possibly supervised by the social work department.

It is important to remember that the child may experience feelings of anxiety and sadness before, during and after access with their parents. As a carer you should comfort the child and look for the support of the social work department to try to make sure that access is as good an experience as possible for the child.

Contact:

Contact can have significant impact on the foster child and fostering family. Contact by letter, cards, school reports etc. is easy to manage and can be very beneficial to the child. However in this age of electronic communication it can be difficult to manage online and mobile phone

contact especially if the child is old enough to have access to technology. If a foster child's expectation of access to or use of mobile phones or computers is at odds with the foster carer's house rules, the foster carer, child's social worker and the child should discuss and agree a compromise.

How often should access occur?

There is no 'magic formula' for access, each child is unique and each family circumstance is different. Whether access arrangements are set out by the social work team or are court ordered, the detail of same should be agreed with the social work department, birth family, the foster carers and the young person/child, (age and stage appropriate).

If the courts are involved in access plans, you may feel that you have less of a say in the decision, again please bring any of your concerns to the attention of your link worker and the child's social worker.

If as a foster carer you are experiencing difficulties in fulfilling access arrangements you should talk to the child's social worker and your link worker, outline the difficulties you are experiencing and seek to negotiate alternative arrangements. In very difficult situations, foster carers can apply to the Court for direction under Section 47 of the Child Care Act, 1991: 'Where a child is in the care of a health board (HSE), the District Court may, of its own motion or on the application of any person, give such directions and make such order on any question affecting the welfare of the child as it thinks proper and may vary or discharge any such direction or order'.

Access Plan:

The access plan will outline arrangements for access under the following headings;

- Dates of visits
- With whom
- Venue
- Transport arrangements (and a back-up plan if the designated person cannot do the transport)
- Any supervision arrangements.

When developing an Access Plan, social workers should consider the following:

- The child's safety.
- The emotional impact of access on the child.
- The age, needs and wishes of the child.
- Family history and quality of relationship.
- Birth parents' willingness and capacity to respond to the child's needs and interests.
- Birth parents' view of the care plan for the child.
- Wishes of parents and other family members.
- Quality of access.
- Management of access.
- Consider the barriers to access and how these will be sorted out.

