



FAMILY VISITS AND CONTACT (ACCESS)

An Information Leaflet for Foster Families

**Irish
Foster Care
Association**

At IFCA we value the importance that family visits and contact has for children in care, we are also aware that when we refer to children's time with their family as Access this can feel too formal; therefore we refer to Access as *Family visits and contact* whenever possible.

Family visits can help the child adjust to the impact of being separated from their family and home environment. It helps to maintain relationships with siblings and other family members (or others who have a significant emotional relationship with the child) when appropriate.

Family Visits and Contact (Access)

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.

Important Legislation

The Child Care Act, 1991 directs that Tusla – 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 (Tusla – Child & Family Agency) in facilitating access to the child by a parent or other person who is allowed such access.'

Article 42a of the Constitution explicitly states children have a right to have their voice heard 'affords the right of the child to be heard in all matters which affect them; the state recognises and affirms the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children and shall, as far as practicable, by its laws protect and vindicate those rights'. Tusla – Child & Family Agency is legally obliged to ensure Court ordered access is carried out; failure to do so would result in the Child and Family Agency 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.

Family Visits (Access)

Family visits are 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 visit is in the best interest of the child.

Tusla – Child & Family Agency has the primary duty to facilitate visits 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. Foster families must accept the child's genetic inheritance, birth family history and their experiences before they come into care as well as the continuing relationship between the child and their family.

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

Key to achieving this is the agreed Access Plan.

Access Plan

The Access Plan will outline arrangements for access under the following headings;

- Dates of visits, with whom and venue
- Transport arrangements (and a back-up plan if the designated person cannot do the transport)
- Any supervision arrangements
- Informal arrangements for relative foster families where possible.

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 family visits should include attention to the foster family's capacity to their family commitments, their need to also attend to their birth children's school, after school activities etc.

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

Challenges and Issues during Family Visits and Contact

If at any time you feel the family visit plan needs to be adjusted or reviewed, if your family circumstances change making it difficult for you to comply with access arrangements, or you have concerns over the child in your care, if you identify child protection concerns, or levels of distress for the child around family visits you should:

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

Supporting the Child

Feelings of anxiety and sadness before, during and after access with their parents may become a barrier to positive family visits. 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. Preparing the child for family visits is vital, speaking positively about the visit and the birth family before and after the visit will be very important.

Pre- Family visits tips

- The child might need to have a comforting object (e.g., favourite toy, blanket) to bring with them
- Planning their outfit for the visit
- Helping the child draw a picture or make something to give their birth parent as a gift at the visit, maybe some buns or treats they could share
- Reminding the child who will be there to collect them
- Reminding them you will be excited to see and be there to welcome them when they return to your care
- Reminding them what will be happening after the access visit is over.

Post Family visits tips

- A warm welcome (“I am so happy to see you”)
- Interacting warmly and calmly with the birth parent in front of the child
- Planning re-entry to the foster home, by including a calm or more energetic ritual (e.g. have a snack, play a quiet game, read a book, go to the park or a fun activity)
- Putting the next visit date on the calendar with 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 independent access to technology. Special attention and consideration need to be given to the challenges that may arise from independent contact from a child to their birth family. Support and sensitivity will be required, encouraging open and non-judgmental communication between you and your foster child will assist in managing this aspect of contact.

Frequently Asked Questions

Should foster carers pay for family visits?

Foster families are not required to pay the costs associated for family visits 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 families are encouraged to ensure, where appropriate, that their foster child has some small monies for their own use when attending a family visit or outing (taken from the HSE ‘Guidance on the use of foster care allowance’).

Who should supervise family visits?

At all times where supervision of access is required this is the responsibility of the child and family social worker, childcare worker or access worker. Foster carers are not responsible for supervising access visits. Where family visits are supervised, the reasons for this are explained carefully to the child, the birth family and foster families. Decisions to supervise family visits are subject to regular review.

How often should family visits happen?

There is no ‘magic formula’ for family visits, each child’s situation is unique, and each family circumstance is different. Whether the arrangements for visits 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, this will be stated and in the visitation plan.

Can a foster child refuse to go to a family visit?

This is a sensitive issue, visits with family are based on the best interest of the child, if necessary, a court will decide on this, it must be established that there has been no negative influence on the child's wishes. The child/young person's, age and stage of development and will be critical to any decision agreed.

You can contact IFCA's National Helpline which is available Monday – Friday from 11am to 3pm to discuss any queries or issues you may be experiencing or for general information on Tel: 01 458 5123 or email: support@ifca.ie



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