

## Family Time (Contact)– Practice Tips

Family time needs to keep the child and young person (child) at the centre, considering their individual needs, interests, permanency goal and circumstances. It needs to be flexible and responsive to accommodate this for the child, their family and other people significant to them. Professional judgement and collaborative discussions need to guide planning for family time.

To better understand how you can support children and their family network in planning for quality family time, you need to know them. Developing meaningful relationships with children helps you gain insight into their likes and dislikes, how best the family interact and connect with each other and the ways in which they live their culture. This will help you think creatively about how you can help children and families create shared experiences and lasting memories, it will also help you mitigate any risks and be responsive to changing dynamics.

### Involving Children and Families in Planning

To ensure family time is as meaningful as possible, it is imperative to help children and families participate in the planning and decision making about family time. Their views should continually be sought on:

- where, when and how family time should occur?
- who they would like to attend?
- how birthdays or other important days should be celebrated
- how connection to culture, religion and spirituality can be incorporated
- the type of activities that can occur during family time
- how long family time should last
- how carers might be involved
- how technology will be used to supplement face-to-face time
- how they are experiencing family time, what supports they might need and what might need to change.

## Thinking About a Child in Family Time

To have access to your family, to understand where you have come from, and to be safe are universal human rights enshrined in the United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child. The [Children and Young Person's \(Care and Protection\) Act 1998](#) recognises that children are entitled to relationships with their family and other significant others.

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Help the child explore their thoughts and emotions about family time. Let them know it is ok to have mixed emotions about family time.

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Family time can be complex for a child because it is the time that they transition between their two worlds, the family they have come from and the family that they live with. It can be a time of fun and connection, but it may trigger trauma memories, or memories of love that make it harder to be in care. A child may also feel responsible for the emotions and reactions of their family and/or their carer or feel torn in their love for both.

Explain to the child what decisions have been made about family time and why. This will help to prepare the child and manage their expectations. Speak with the child about what they would like to happen if the family time visit is not a positive experience. By being respectful and transparent you help build a trusting relationship with the child.

While it is important to be flexible and responsive to the needs and circumstances of the family or carer, creating a sense of predictability for the child is paramount. Children in out-of-home care (OOHC) have often lived a life characterised by inconsistency and chaos which can contribute to feelings of anxiety and distress. Ensuring family time is well thought out, planned, and consistently scheduled can help reduce those feelings by creating a sense of predictability.

## Thinking About Families in Family Time

Family time can be incredibly complex for families. On one hand, many family members are delighted to see their child, regardless of the circumstances, others can have complex responses to family time:

- If a parent is having family time, it means their child has been removed from their care. This may create feelings of shame, guilt, grief and loss. Families may not fully understand or agree with the reasons their child was removed, which leads to confusion and anger.
- Family time is often supervised, particularly during the interim period, and the supervisor will take notes and write a detailed report for the court. This can make families feel extremely vulnerable and anxious and may impede the authentic relationship between a parent and their child. Speak with families and why you are writing notes and how they might be used.
- Children and families may experience each other very differently in family time than they did pre-removal. Families are often trying to present their perceived 'best self', this can seem foreign to the child. Children, in turn, often respond differently to their families than they did pre-removal, due to trauma, anger, sadness, feeling of abandonment and the forming of new relationships and ways of living developed in the care system.
- Families may not know how to 'play' with their children or may lose their confidence as the child grows and changes.
- More and more carers are being involved in family time. Sometimes attending and supporting, other times arranging, particularly if they are seeking permanent orders (guardianship or adoption) for the child they care for. This can be disempowering and difficult for families, especially if their child calls a carer 'mum' or 'dad'.

For more information see [Working with Families in Preservation and Restoration](#)

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Families can experience the same emotional turmoil around family time that we see in children. Practitioners must be mindful of the significant power imbalances and the vulnerability this creates for families.

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## Thinking About a Carer in Family Time

Carers have a very important role in family time, partly because a child's behaviour around family time can be challenging. By supporting carers, you can help them to meet the emotional needs of the child before and after family time. Help carers to understand why family time is important, and the positive role they can play in supporting children to stay connected to their family.

Where appropriate, carers should be involved in some family time. This helps to make it a more natural experience for the child and for children to feel less tension because of divided loyalties. It is especially important for carers considering becoming the guardian or adoptive parent of the child to be involved in family time. When a child is being returned to their parents, carers can help make the transition successful.

Involve the carers in the planning process. This includes logistical planning. For instance, whether the carer is able to transport the child to and from visits with their family and other ways they might be involved. Listen to the carer's concerns about family time and try to schedule time so it complements the child's everyday life with the carer.

Carers should not be used to supervise family time where there are concerns about the safety and wellbeing of the child, this is a casework responsibility.

For more information on working with carers see [Supporting Carers Through Restoration](#).

It is also important to recognise that carers can also have complex thoughts and emotions about family time. Prior to the introduction of the Permanency Support Program (PSP) carers were rarely asked to support and mentor families for restoration, but under the PSP this happens more frequently. Some experienced carers may feel like the 'goal posts' have moved. Some carers will have developed very strong attachments to the child in their care, and it may hurt them to let go, despite truly wanting the best for them and their family.

## Children's Behaviour Around Family Time

Children may have a range of emotions both before and after family time. This is very normal. As a result, they can behave and respond differently to carers and others. They may want to stay with their family, feel pressure from family to stay with them

or have been triggered by previous experiences of abuse and neglect. Help carers understand this is a normal reaction and why the child might be behaving like this.

### **Support for the carer**

Sometimes children may be anxious and will tell their carer that they do not want to go to family time. They may be saying this because this is truly how they feel, but sometimes children may also be processing a range of emotions they are having trouble expressing. Encourage the carer to listen to the child and their concerns without making assumptions and to contact you (the caseworker) if they are worried.

Talk with carers about how the child is reacting. Explain to the carer that it is important that they don't consider the child's behaviour as 'bad'. Expecting them to stop the behaviour, without supporting them will be frightening for the child. They are using this behaviour to cope.

You and the carer should explore:

- what the child might be trying to tell you with this behaviour
- what has worked in the past to help the child?
- how they feel when the child reacts in this way
- what they do when the child shows that behaviour
- what would be most helpful for them when this happens
- what they think would be most helpful for the child.

Offer support to the carer and make sure they know they can raise any worries with you. Talk to the carer about whether they feel they need additional support and help them access this.

### **Support for the child**

Help the child explore their thoughts and emotions about family time. Let them know it's ok to have mixed emotions about family time. Give them the opportunity to share their worries and tune into what the child is telling you verbally and non-verbally. Help them reflect on their thoughts, feelings and behaviours leading up to, and after, family time. Support them to think a bit deeper and unpack the possible reasons they may be thinking or feeling that way or what their behaviours might mean. Normalise and validate their feelings and recognise the difficulty that comes with seeing their siblings and family for a short time. Be flexible and creative in how you

connect with the child and consider using drawing, painting, song writing, photography or exploratory and imaginative play to help you understand their world.

When the underlying reasons for the feelings and/or behaviours have been unpacked, workshop with the child some practical solutions to address them. This might mean doing something they enjoy before or after family time, or rethinking the timing, activities or other details of family time. Empowering the child to help develop these solutions shows them their voice is being heard and they have played a part in decision making about their life.

Checking in with the child regularly and having ongoing conversations about their experiences before, during and after family time will help them feel supported. It will also give insight into what is working well during family time and what aspects of family time might need to change.

## Relationship-Based Family Time

Children and families need support during family time. Use relationship-based practice skills to help make family time positive for everyone. Expressing empathy and focusing on strengths can build hope and motivate change to strengthen vulnerable families.

### Features of relationship-based family time

<b>Nurture relationships</b>	With the child, the family, the carers and with colleagues
<b>Plan for positive interactions</b>	Talk to the family about what they want family time to be like Encourage them to plan activities and tell family stories
<b>Support the child</b>	Explore their hopes and worries and help them explore and process their emotions
<b>Be creative</b>	Consider cooking a meal together, creating a family stories book or attending the child's sporting games
<b>Collaborate</b>	The OOHC system can be complex. Sometimes more than one service provider will manage a sibling group. Work with each other and Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to ensure children get meaningful time together. Do not let

	children’s relationships be compromised by challenging logistics
<b>Role-model</b>	Role modelling respectful relationships for families by listening, demonstrating empathy and noticing strengths. Be the family’s guide by role modelling play, boundaries and supporting secure attachment
<b>If your worried – talk about it</b>	Do not be scared to share your worries with a family in a respectful way. Families deserve the opportunity to make improvements
<b>Review regularly</b>	People can and do change. If a family’s circumstances change, review family time. For example, if a mother keeps her new baby, she may no longer need her family time supervised. Children change as they grow and develop. Family time needs to be responsive to this growth
<b>Stay focused</b>	What will be most meaningful for the child?

### References:

Talpin S., Bullen, T., McArthur, M., Humphreys, C., Kertesz, M. (2014). ‘Submission to the Parliament of Australia Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs: Out of Home Care’. The University of Melbourne and Australian Catholic University.