

Supporting Carers Through Restoration

Casework skills

Carers play an important role in supporting a child or young person (child) in restoration. Carers can play a critical role in successful restoration, through supporting the child's relationship with their parents. Research tells us that positive relationships between parents and carers leads to better outcomes for children returning home (Kemp et .al, 2009; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000). Carers can provide practical and emotional support to children and help them understand the restoration process.

However, the restoration of a child can be a difficult time for carers. They may be feeling sadness, grief, anger, frustration, worry, excitement, joy and hope. Relative carers are likely to experience additional mixed emotions due to the conflicted role of keeping the child safe whilst often also supporting the relative parent.

Many carers – especially carers who have been caring for many years – may be new to the idea of helping a child return to their parents. Others may be keen to help a child return home but are worried about their future. Caseworkers always need to consider how challenging it might be for carers, especially when they have been caring for a child for a number of years.

Caseworkers play a central role in supporting and facilitating the participation of carers in the restoration process, particularly helping carers cope with the emotional effects of returning a child to their family and helping them to remain focused on the child.

Planning Restoration with Carers

Restoration can be an uncertain time for carers. Before you begin planning restoration with carers, spend time with them to help them understand why the child is being restored. Be mindful not to diminish the role the carer has had in the development and growth of the child. Acknowledge their love and contribution to the child. Remember that the child is likely to have established relationships with the carer's family, friends and community.

Caseworkers should help carers understand what is expected of them and what the process will be. This includes:

- their role in supporting the child to prepare for, attend and adjust after, family time
- supporting the transition, this may include going along to family time with the child and building relationships with the parents
- the proposed timeframe for when the child will increase time with their parents including anticipated unsupervised and overnight family time with their parents
- when it is expected that the child will return full time to the care of their parents (including any role the carer may play in supporting this process)
- If the carers are from a different culture, they may also need early support to understand and support the child adjusting to cultural differences when they start spending unsupervised time with their parents.
- any upcoming court dates.

Caseworkers should also discuss with the family and carer the role the carer may have in the child's life after they go home.

Helping Carers Come to Terms with Restoration

It is important to help the carer to accept the restoration, so they can support the child throughout the process and contribute to restoration planning.

The carer may disagree with the decision to restore the child to their parents. They might feel that the parents have not changed enough for the child to be safe. They may be worried that parents will return to old ways or feel that the child is better off living with them. Even when they are opposed to restoration, carers must be included in the planning and decision-making process, as they know the child well.

Caseworkers can help carers by having child-centred conversations that include:

- the hopes the carer has for the child's future
- concerns the carer has and how these may be addressed.
- things the carer feels need to remain consistent in the child's life e.g. sports, friends, school.
- discussing favourite memories and stories about the child and asking the carer to help add to the child's life story work.

You can also use this time to discuss the carers' own upbringing and how this influences their thoughts and feelings about restoration. This can help you work with

carers about judgements and biases, and how this affects their ability to support restoration now, and in the future. Relative carers in particular may have insights that will help you understand their experience and the experience of children and parents.

Helpful Tips for Supporting Carers During Restorations

With training and support, foster carers are more likely to promote the child's relationship with their biological family (Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000).

Make the time to sit with and listen to carer's feelings and thoughts. Help them work out strategies when they are struggling and offer positive reinforcement where things are going well.

Practices that help you in this are:

- showing empathy and regard, be compassionate, respectful and non-judgemental
- being curious and take the time to understand the carer and their family
- using active listening skills, ask (open) questions and check if you have understood the carers answer
- speaking and writing in ways they understand (no jargon)
- having honest conversations
- decreasing feelings of shame or blame by re-assuring carers that it is okay to sometimes have mixed emotions about being a carer, about the child's behaviour or their own responses to the process and journey
- highlight and validate carer's efforts, strengths and capacity in restoration.

Prepare the carer as the child spends more time at home with their parents, they will be adjusting to new changes and expectations, and they may be confused or demanding. Carers will need to be flexible during this time, to support the child in this transition.

Please see [Relationship-Based Practice](#) and [Supporting Children and Young People in Restoration](#) for further information.

Relationships Between Carers and Parents

Research shows that children get better care when parents and carers exchange information about the child and work together to make family visits positive. Children also worry less about divided loyalties (Goodman, 2013).

Caseworkers can help facilitate a partnership between carers and parents focused on their mutual love of the child by:

- Encouraging both parties to always speak with respect, hope and trust.
- Letting the carer and parent know about what the research says about how their relationship influences the child.
- Supporting the carer to build empathy for the parent by talking about why some people experience problems.
- Helping carers to make sense of behaviours or reactions of parents explaining that the parent is likely feeling grief at the loss of their child and fear that their child will no longer love them.
- Asking the parent and the carer how they would like to partner with each other and creating opportunities for them to each get to know each other e.g. Develop a 'get to know about me' sheet.
- Doing a shared activity about what they love about the child; what their dreams are for the child etc. – if they are hesitant about doing this together this may be done separately, and the caseworker shares each other's contributions with each other.
- coming together for life story work time.

Ways parents and carers can work together to be to help the child including:

- carers inviting the biological family to celebrations
- involving the family in shared decision-making
- providing updates to each other about the child's experiences, growth and development (eg preferred morning routine or new favourite toy)
- sharing meals
- attending doctors and other appointments together
- carers acknowledging parents' insights and providing positive feedback to help parents build trust and confidence
- face-to-face and informal contact.

Caseworkers will need to support and guide carers with these ideas and activities, so the carer is able to do this sensitively and effectively.

Family Time (Contact)

Research suggests that children whose carers and parents have a positive relationship experience less distress around family time (Morrison, Mishna & Aitken 2011). When parents and carers; trust each other, have the same ideas about what is in the child's best interest and work collaboratively, the child will have more meaningful family time.

During restoration, carers will often be managing the increased time that a child may be spending with their parents. As the child's parents become more active in caregiving duties, it can create logistical questions to plan together - such as who is responsible for bringing the child to and from family time, or managing the competing schedules of carers and parents.

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.

Sometimes children may be anxious and will tell their carer that they don't 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 have concerns.

Talk with carers about how the child is reacting, including the absence of any reactions or behaviours.

Explain to the carer that it is important that children's behaviours are not considered 'bad'. These behaviours are strategies that they are using to cope. Expecting them to stop the behaviour, without supporting them to soothe in other ways, will be frightening for them.

You might ask:

- What might this child be telling you with this behaviour? Are there other possibilities about what this behaviour means?

- What has worked in the past to help the child express themselves, settle and feel safe?
- How do you feel when the child reacts in this way?
- What do you do when the child shows that behaviour?
- What would be most useful for you when this happens?
- What do you think would be most useful for the child?

If the child's behaviour becomes more challenging during the restoration process, consider whether the child would benefit from therapeutic supports to help them manage their feelings as well as any worries, fears or past trauma. Consider reviewing their positive behaviour support plan (if they have one).

Discuss how the child's reactions are affecting the carer and what strategies and supports they can use to improve the experience for everyone. Offer support to the carer and make sure they know they can raise any worries or concerns for the child with you. Talk to the carer about whether they feel they need additional support and help them access this.

For more information see [Supporting Family Time \(Contact\) in Restoration](#).

After a child has Returned to Their Parents.

Carers can experience loss and grief after a child has left their care and returned to live with their parents. Children also might be sad and feel confused. Loss and grief can be particularly acute when a child has been in their care for a long time. Talk with the carer, the child and the child's parents about how the carer will remain in the child's life. Plan for this well before the child has returned to live with their parents. Listen to and support the carers' loss and grief. Arrange for extra support if needed.

Additional Support During Restoration

My Forever Family NSW provides support and advocacy for carers. Caseworkers should ensure that carers are aware of [My Forever Family NSW](#) and know how they can get in contact for support. If a carer is either Aboriginal or caring for an Aboriginal child they can also get support from [AbSec](#).

References

Kemp, S. P, Marcenko, M. O., Hoagwood, K., & Vesneski, W. (2009). Engaging parents in child welfare services: Bridging family needs and child welfare mandates. *Child Welfare, 88(1)*, 101-126.

Morrison, J., Mishna, F., Cook C. & Aitken, G (2011). Access visits: perceptions of child protection workers, foster parents and children who are Crown wards. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33(9)*, 1476-1483.

Sanchirico, A. & Jablonka, K. (2000). Keeping foster children connected to their biological parents: The impact of foster parent training and support. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal, 17*, 185-203.