



Knowledge Bite

Children’s Family Time in Public Law Proceedings

The arrangements for each individual child must be based upon their own unique needs, circumstances, wishes and feelings. Making good decisions about children’s arrangements requires finding out about the child to fully understand them, good planning, robust support, and frequent review. It is crucial that as Guardians we challenge assumptions about what is “a normal level of contact” and any ‘one size fits all approaches’. Each individual child’s arrangements must reflect their unique needs.

Learning from the experts – what do young people say?

Four members of the Family Justice Young People’s Board (FJYPB) spoke to us about their experiences of public law proceedings and the arrangements that were made for them to see their families. Here are some of the things that they told us:



“When you have siblings, what is good for them may not be good for you. They [social workers] try and group you all together”

“For the 6 weeks summer holiday, every day I went to visit my mum. I was like what?, when can I hang out with my friends? No one even asked me how I felt about it or told me what was happening. Even if I didn’t agree, if someone had explained, it would have made a massive difference. I feel like everyone was pushing me to see my parents and I felt obliged to”.

“They [professionals] were telling me it was my decision and it left me in a vulnerable position as mum knew it was my decision and manipulated me”.

“I didn’t want to see her [mum]. It caused a lot of extra stress and no one listened. I had a foster carer who listened to me and she couldn’t stop the contact, but knowing she was listening made a difference”.

“I worried about upsetting my parents and it became a necessity to go and see them. They would try and contact me through friends. You feel like you just have to say what you should”



When asked for ideas about what could have been done differently by their Guardians and any top tips for new Guardians, the young people made these valuable suggestions:

"LISTEN - take action through the listening"

"Remember that one child is an individual. They are different to the last child you worked with and different to their brothers and sisters".

"My guardian used to take me to cafes and eventually I started letting my guard down. It wasn't at home and it was an outside environment which helped a lot"

"Don't make assumptions based on contact observations. Look what happens after the contact. If a child is self-harming or suicidal, take action".

"They took me on a tour of court, and it was like a piece of the puzzle as I could picture where it was all happening"

"Meeting the judge was good"

"Having a foster carer who listened and watched to understand me. Having someone who understood helped"

"One social worker arranged to call me after contact to find out how it had gone which was good"

"They just think it's just an hour of your life, but the impact is bigger"

Here are links to 3 videos of children talking about their experiences of family time after adoption.

[Voice of the child | Contact after adoption \(rip.org.uk\) – there are 3 videos of children talking about their experiences](#)

What does the research tell us?

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2020) identified 6 key messages from research which professionals should consider when involved in decision making about arrangements for children in care, or those who have been adopted, to spend time with their families.

Focus on the quality of contact

- Ask yourself, what would indicate that the plan for contact is likely to lead to good quality contact?
- What needs to change to lead to good quality contact?

Listen to the views of children and young people

- Ask yourself, how have children been involved in discussions about their arrangements?
- With babies and very young children, is there evidence that their long-term needs for family connections have been properly considered?

Recognise the significance of brothers/sisters, grandparents, wider family and friends

- What needs to change to ensure that children are able to keep in touch with people they have formed relationships with?
- What will help ensure that all potential family and wider family connections are identified?

Ensure that all involved are clear about the purpose of contact

- How can you ensure that the quality of contact immediately after the removal of a child, and before plans are settled, can be of the highest quality?
- Can everyone involved say what the purpose of contact is for this particular child with this particular relative or friend?

Ensure that contact plans are tailored to each child and reviewed regularly

- What systems support dynamic and flexible contact arrangements?
- How can you avoid a formulaic approach to contact plans?
- What systems would support better opportunities for review and changes to arrangements?

Ensure skilled professional support is available

- What support is being provided for children in relation to contact?
- What support is being provided for parents to manage contact? Are they being given suggestions and advice about interactions with their children, particularly babies?
- What support are carers getting in managing contact?

Reviewing Children's Family Time – does it still meet this individual child's needs?

Elsbeth Neil's model reminds us that making decisions about children's arrangements is a dynamic process, rather than a one-off event. In other words, professionals need to regularly review whether the arrangements are meeting each individual child's needs, how children are feeling about their arrangements, and the impact that it is having upon them.



This five step approach encourages professionals to consider:

- What is the purpose of contact?
- What are the risks and strengths to each individual child?
- What is the plan?
- What support is being offered to the child/family/carers to make this the best possible experience for each child?
- What plans are in place to regularly review each child's arrangements? (this should include listening to the child's views)
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For further details the full report can be accessed using this link - [Contact: Making Good Decisions for Child in Public Law](#)

Final thought – think about your final letter to the IRO. Is there anything further that you need to share?

Case study for team discussions

Ayesha is 3 months old. She was placed in foster care at 2 months old due to on-going concerns surrounding neglectful parenting, which included alcohol use by her mother, Miss Abidi. An interim care order has been granted and Ayesha currently sees her mother 3 times a week at a contact centre. Ayesha has never met her father and his whereabouts are unknown at this stage. You have been appointed as the Guardian for Ayesha. The Local Authority are undertaking a parenting assessment of Miss Abidi and alcohol testing.

Q. In relation to the plans for Ayesha to spend time with her mother, what are some of the things you would need to consider at the outset of your involvement? What information do you need? What would you need to do if you didn't agree with the Local Authority's proposals?

You are advised Ayesha has a half-sister, Aleena, who is 11 years old and lives with her father. She sees her mother regularly and the time they spend together is supported by Aleena's aunty in the community. Prior to Ayesha being placed in foster care, Aleena had met her sister several times. Miss Abidi says that Aleena wants to see Ayesha.

Q. What do you think your role is in relation to Ayesha and Aleena spending time together? What would you do in response to this?

The parenting assessment of Miss Abidi is positive and the alcohol testing shows a reduction in her alcohol use over recent weeks. The Local Authority want to increase the arrangements for Ayesha to spend time with her mother.



Case study for team discussions cont.....

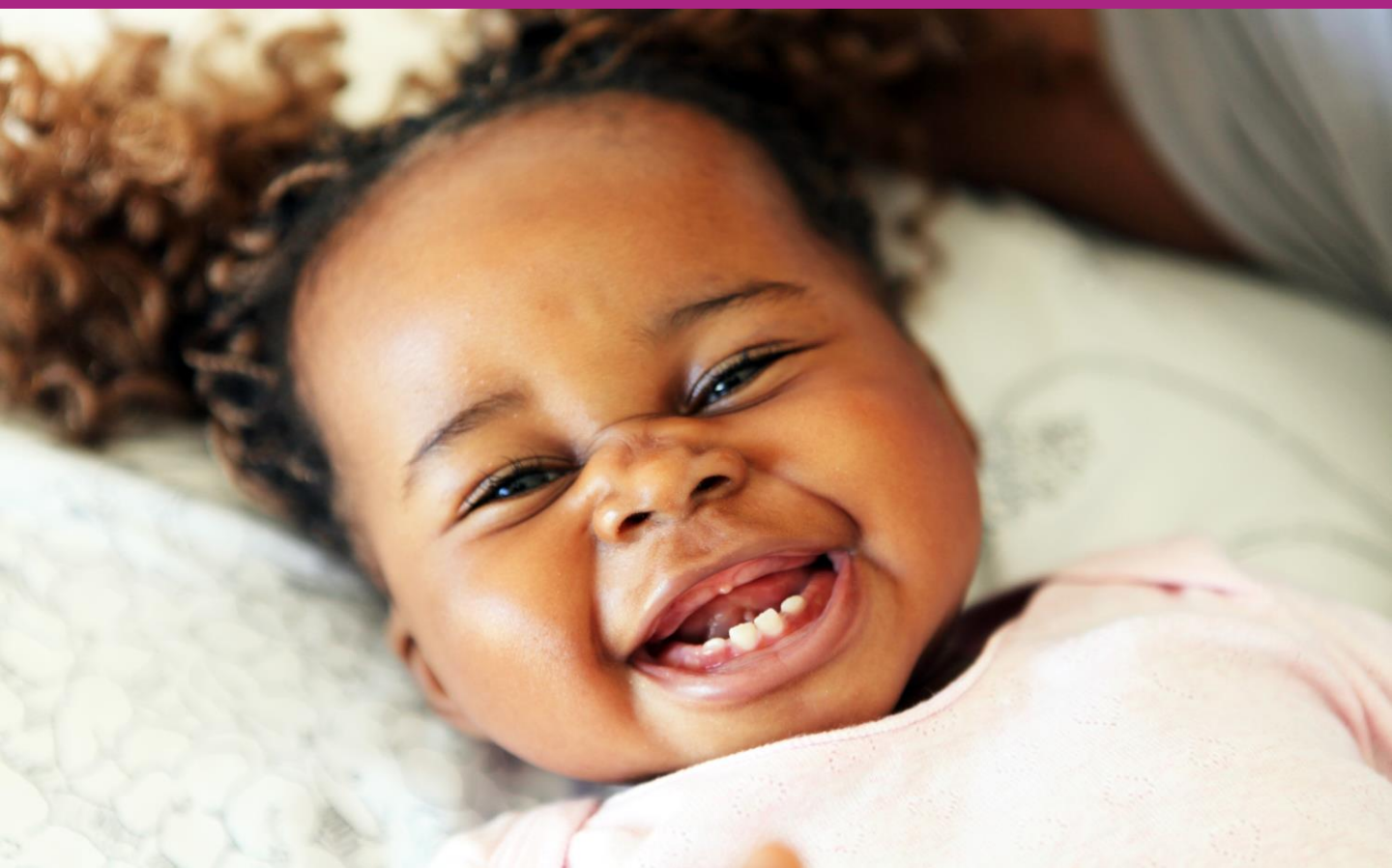
Q. What would you need to think about when considering the proposals of the Local Authority?

During the proceedings, Ayesha's father is located by the Local Authority and expresses a wish to spend time with his daughter. Although still living with foster carers, Ayesha is now being cared for by her mother four days a week in the community for several hours. She is also seeing Aleena once a month.

Q. What are some of things you need to consider in relation to Ayesha being introduced to her father and how this can be managed alongside the ongoing assessment of her mother?

The final plan proposed by the Local Authority is one of reunification to her mother's care.

Q. When considering the Local Authority's final care plan, what would you need to think about in respect of the arrangements for her to spend time with her father and her sister, and any other family members?





- Assess each child as an individual; don't assume that the best plan for one child is the right plan for his/her brothers and sisters
- Listen to what the child wants and what their family time means to them; make sure that they feel heard
- Focus on the purpose and quality of family time for every individual child
- Consider mechanisms to review the child's family time; arrangements need to be dynamic and evolve as the child's needs change
- Consider what support is being offered to the child, the family, and the carers to manage family time and ensure that it is of the best quality for each individual child
- Carefully consider children's relationships with their brothers and sisters; don't underestimate the value of these important relationships
- Family time needs to be considered as a priority in care planning and when balancing the benefits to the child of adoption vs long term foster care
- Put yourself in the child's shoes and think about how the plans feel for them
- There is no 'one size fits all'; plans must be based on the analysis of each individual child's needs

Research in Practice have developed a [Contact Planning Tool](#) to assist practitioners in making good decisions about contact for children in public law proceedings.

Further research and resources

Cafcass – ‘Top tips for keeping children informed and keeping them at the centre of their case’ and ‘Top tips for professionals when working with brothers and sisters’ can be accessed [here](#)

Iyer, P., Albakri, M., Burridge, H., Mayer, M., and Gill, V. (2020). The effects of digital contact on children’s wellbeing: evidence from public and private law contexts.

Iyer, P., Boddy, J., Hammelsbeck, R., and Lynch-Huggins, S. (2020). Contact following placement in care, adoption, or special guardianship: implications for children and young people’s wellbeing

Neil, E., Copson, R., and Sorensen, P. (2020). Contact during lockdown: How are children and their birth families keeping in touch