



**Hearing from Children and Young People
in Care: Experiences of Family Contact
Western Australia (2014)**

CREATE Foundation

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Acknowledgements

Project Participants

CREATE would like to thank and acknowledge the contributions and support of:

- The 24 children and young people who shared their invaluable time, experiences and expertise.
- The workers and carers who encouraged children and young people to take part in this valuable discussion.

CREATE Project Team

- Lead researcher and facilitator, Katherine Browne, State Coordinator, WA CREATE Foundation
- WA CREATE Foundation Community Facilitators Laura Beegan, Amy Taylor, and Beth Webster for their co-facilitation and scribing

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the children and young people that were involved in this consultation. The contents of this report have been developed in consultation with a non-representative group of young people in care and are not meant to represent the in care population in total.

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About CREATE Foundation

CREATE Foundation is a systems advocacy organisation that works with children and young people who are in, or have left, the child protection system, to empower them to share their experiences in order to change the service system to improve services and outcomes.

CREATE Foundation's mission is to create a better life for children and young people in care. CREATE believes that all children and young people with a care experience should have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

CREATE is a systems advocacy organisation that works to:

- **Connect** children and young people with each other, CREATE and their community;
- **Empower** children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard; and
- **Change** the care system, in consultation with children and young people, through advocacy to improve policies, practices and services and increase community awareness.

CREATE Foundation Limited was established in 1999 in the belief that a truly effective child protection system is one that listens to the views of the children and young people it seeks to protect and support. The importance of encouraging and facilitating the participation of children and young people in key decisions that affect their lives is a core principle of the organisation.

Purpose

The purpose of the consultation in this report is to hear the opinions of children and young people in care about their experiences of family contact, to assist Government and non-Government organisations enhance their delivery of contact for children and young people in care in Western Australia. The topic of this consultation was discussed in conjunction with the Children's, Youth, Family Agency Association (CYFAA) – the peak organisation representing non-government out of home care and child protection agencies in Western Australia.

In 2012, CYFAA released a report entitled "*Best Practice in Delivering Family Contact for Children in Care in Western Australia: A Preliminary Study of Issues and Themes*". CYFAA commissioned and completed the report in response to the changes that will see out-of-home care service providers and agencies taking full responsibility for the provision and resourcing of family contact for children in care with their agencies. In the past this was resourced and facilitated by the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. The report provided some insight into agencies' involvement in contact and the resources available and WA agency practices regarding contact services. A literature review regarding what constitutes good practice was undertaken, as well as a review of the costs involved in the delivery of contact. The scope of that report was limited to consulting with staff members from the out of home care agencies who are members of CYFAA, including Wanslea, Salvation Army, MercyCare, Uniting Care West, Key Assets, Centrecare, Yorganop, Anglicare WA, Fin WA, Crossroads West, and Parkerville.

As mentioned, CREATE initiated this consultation with children and young people in care to enable their unique perspective and opinions to be captured on the issue of family contact.

Executive Summary

Children and young people told CREATE about the importance of contact with their family, and identified a number of areas for improvement in how carers and caseworkers can best support meaningful and child-focused family contact for children and young people in care. In particular, children and young people noted the importance of being involved in decision making about contact and ensuring adequate preparation, support and communication throughout contact.

Key Findings include:

- Contact is important for children and young people to develop and/or maintain relationships with family members (including parents, siblings and extended family members), build shared experiences and memories, and help them develop their sense of identity.
- Children and young people need to be consulted about contact arrangements and decisions, and their individual wishes and needs considered in decision making about contact. Where a child or young person's wishes can't be met, the reasons for this need to be explained.
- Contact needs to "fit in" for young people -to minimise impact on schooling and other activities, and to enable children and young people to plan around and feel prepared for it.
- Communication with children and young people about contact arrangements, decisions, or changes to contact is essential in ensuring that they feel adequately prepared for, and informed about what is happening. Children and young people want to know what the arrangements are in advance, and also know why certain decisions have been made about contact (e.g., supervised, suspended, cancelled, reintroduced, or changed). It is important that young people understand the reason for changes so that they do not make false assumptions, or blame themselves.
- Contact can be a confusing and emotional experience for children and young people, and support needs to be given to children and young people after contact in a way that is responsive to that child or young person's individual needs.
- Children and young people need opportunities to provide feedback about the contact that they have to ensure that it is a safe and positive experience. Depending on the child or young person's wishes, this might be through conversation with a case worker, contact supervisor, or carer, at a time when the child or young person feels ready to provide feedback (e.g., not necessarily straight after contact).
- Care planning provides an opportunity to explore young people's views and wishes in regards to contact and have this captured in formal decision making processes. Children and young people's participation in this process should be flexible and according to how the child or young person wants to participate.
- Children and young people want strong communication between themselves, carers, workers, agencies, and families to make sure that everyone is clear and consistent about contact decisions and arrangements.
- Supervised contact needs to be explained to children and young people, and occur in a way that supports the safety of children and young people whilst allowing them to feel comfortable and free to interact with their family.
- Workers supervising contact should discuss a plan with children and young people prior to contact about what to do if the child or young person is feeling unsafe or uncomfortable, or how else safety can be enhanced during contact.

Voices of Children and Young People

CREATE spoke with 24 children and young people with a care experience aged between 12 and 17 years old seeking their views about their experiences of contact with family members. CREATE sought to consult with a minimum of 15 children and young people aged 12- 17 years, and the consultation was promoted through CREATE WA's network of key stakeholders, out of home care agencies, carers and children and young people who were current clubCREATE members. Participants were invited to attend focus group discussions in November 2013 and January 2014, and were selected on their availability to attend.

Of the 24 children and young people involved in the consultation, 13 were male, and 11 were female. Seven of the young people identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and 5 identified as being a member of another cultural group, including Kenyan, Australian South Sea Islander, Greek, Dutch, Maori and Seychellois. 12 young people were in general foster care placements (both Departmental and agency), 8 young people were in residential care in a Departmental or agency placement, 2 young people were in kinship care placements, 1 young person was living with carers under a Special Guardianship Order, and 1 participant was living with a biological parent.

In order to capture the views of children and young people in this consultation, CREATE developed and used a set of questions to talk with children and young people about their experiences. These questions covered the following areas; children and young people's experiences of family contact; children and young people's ability to have a say in family contact; and children and young people's understanding of family contact arrangements and preparation for contact.

Three separate sessions were conducted to hear from children and young people. One young person took part in an individual interview in November 2013, which lasted for approximately one hour, and two focus group discussions were held in January 2014. Each focus group took approximately 2½ hours, with one group of 11 young people and one group of 12 young people. Young people were asked the same questions in the interview and the focus group discussions, and were given the opportunity to respond to the questions either verbally, or by providing a written response to the questions.

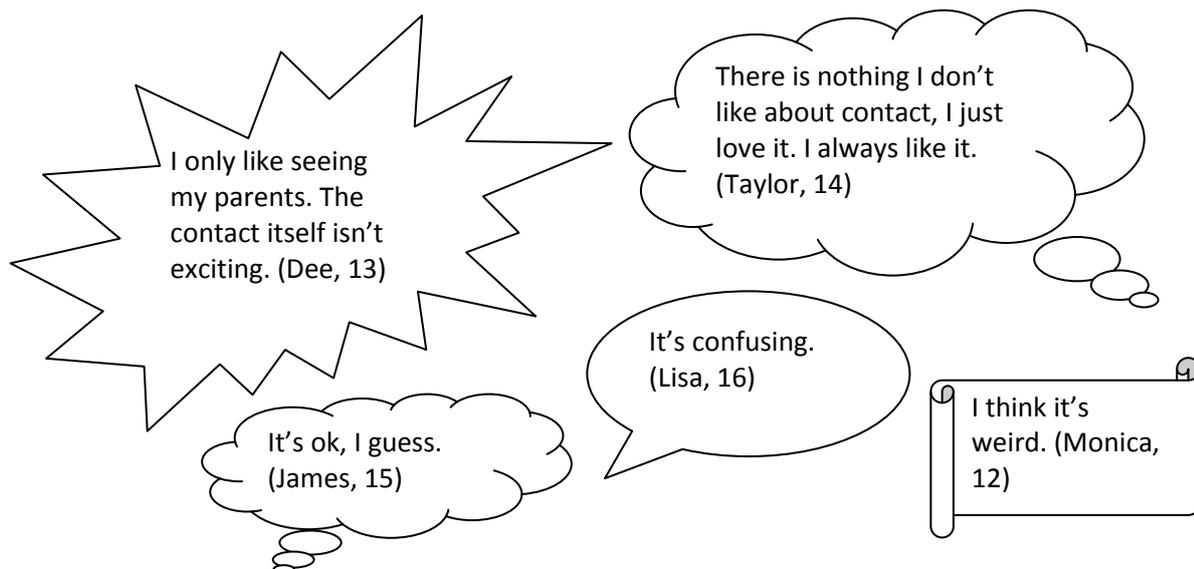
The individual interview and focus group discussions were scribed verbatim by CREATE staff members, and after both sessions were completed, the children and young people's responses (both verbal and written) were collated in one document under the headings of questions asked. The children and young people's responses were then analysed and grouped together into common themes or topics, and these themes are reflected in the key findings and the body of this report.

The quotes in this document have been taken directly from the voices of young people with a care experience. In order to protect their identities, we have changed the names of the children and young people who have provided CREATE with their thoughts and opinions.

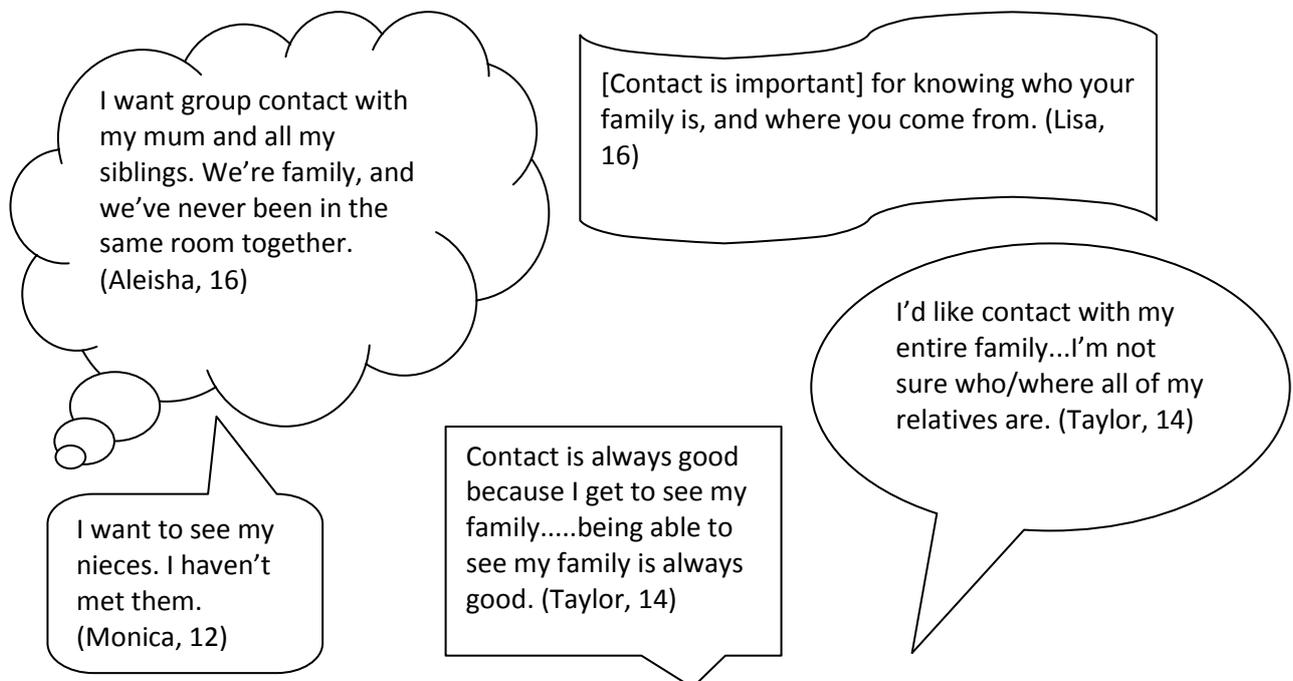
The importance of contact for children and young people

When a child is placed in out of home care, the Department has a responsibility to ensure that the child or young person has access to information about their family, and the opportunity to maintain and further develop relationships with their family members through contact.

The children and young people who participated in this consultation had varied experiences of contact, with some young people happy or satisfied with it, and others who were not. These different experiences of contact reflect the individual differences in family situations and case planning decisions, differences that are highlighted throughout the consultation report.



Whilst their experiences were different, overall children and young people identified that contact was important not only for maintaining and developing meaningful relationships with family members, but also in bringing family together and knowing who their family is.



Some young people thought contact should be centred around special occasions and building shared experiences and memories with family members.

It's good being able to spend time with your family on special occasions, like birthdays and Christmas and Mother's Day. (Aleisha, 16)

I want them to come to my sports activities like competitions and sports days. (Dane, 13)

Contact would be good around holidays and special occasions. Weekends would be great too. (Monica, 12)

I'd like to be able to go away with them for a few days on like a camp or something. (Adam, 12)

A number of young people spoke about the role of contact in maintaining relationships with siblings, as well as frustrations that sometimes contact with siblings was seen to be less important than contact with other family members (e.g., parents).

The best thing about is contact is being around your siblings. (John, 15)

When Mum cancels, the staff thinks the whole contact with the family is cancelled, which means I don't get to see my sister. (Taylor, 14)

Being child focused in the delivery of family contact

Overall, young people spoke about the importance of being child focused in the ongoing decision-making, planning of, preparation for, and delivery of contact with family members. This included hearing, and acting on, the views and opinions of children and young people, and the importance of communication with young people about contact decisions. It also was vital to explain decision making, and provide opportunities for children and young people to be able to access support and feedback about their contact. How supervised contact is best facilitated must be determined through consultation with children and young people,, and the importance of reliability and consistency of contact arrangements needs to be stressed.

Young people's wishes for their contact

Young people were able to identify and articulate different things that could enhance the contact that they were having with their family members, and what they wanted contact to look like. For some young people, this meant having unsupervised contact, for others it meant having activity-based contact with their family members, or being able to share in special occasions.

I want [my parents] to come to my sports activities like competitions and sports days. (Dane, 12)

I want contact in open places like parks. Somewhere with space where we can have fun. (Dee, 13)

Why can't they come to things like my graduations and achievements? (Jessica, 17)

[I'd like my] contact around holidays and special occasions. Weekends would be great too. (Monica, 12)

I want contact somewhere private. (Lisa, 16)

[Don't have it] in a public place near my life. I don't want my friends to see. (Leah, 16)

Contact would be good at home with your parents. (Shayla, 13)

Don't have contact after school. I'm tired and in my school uniform. (Adam, 12)

I want to go to the beach, park, bowling, pools, cafe or my parent's house. (Kayla, 15)

I want longer contact time, and more time to catch up....lots of things happen between visits and there isn't enough time to share with your family what has been happening when it normally goes for an hour. (Taylor, 14)

I don't like being stuck in an office. Contact is better when you get to do activities on contact rather than just sit in an office. (Rob, 13)

Contact would be better by having enough time, an hour isn't long enough. (Martin, 16)

I have my contact at the DCP offices. I don't like it there. I don't feel safe in Armadale. (Lisa, 16)

Mix up where we meet! Don't always have it in the same place. Have it outside the DCP office, like at the shops or a place somewhere nice. (Aleisha, 16)

[Contact is better] when it's long and when I see them more often. (Shayla, 13)

Whilst it might not always be possible to facilitate contact in the way that young people want (e.g., due to safety concerns around unsupervised contact, resources etc.), it is important to recognise that each child or young person has a different idea of what they would like contact to look like. To be truly child-focused in the delivery of family contact, it is important to hear from young people and consider their views as part of planning so that contact is enjoyable and meaningful for them.

Young people expressed that it was important that contact was arranged in way that “fit in” with what was happening for children and young people in relation to their lives, activities, and schooling, and that reflected the child or young person’s wishes.

Have contact outside of school hours and don’t pull me out of class. School is important. [Sometimes contact] might not fit in for kids – during school time kids are missing out on education and other important stuff. If they have other pre-planned activities it can disrupt those activities and disrupt them socially. (Aleisha, 16)

Have contact close to the end of the school day so you only miss out on 20 minutes. (John, 15)

[My] contact happens during school hours, but I leave school about 2, so I don’t fall behind on school work. (Taylor, 14)

Being flexible in the delivery of contact for children and young people is important. One young person spoke about being able to organise his own contact, and that this enabled him to have control over the process and how he wanted contact to look. This kind of flexibility, where it is safe to do so, promotes independence and control for young people, and encourages them to develop their skills around managing their family relationships, which is particularly important as young people move towards independence when they will be expected to manage these relationships without support from the Department.

I get to [organise] my own – if you don’t want it then you don’t have it. I organise it, so I get to sort out who, where, when. (Jack, 16)

Having a say in contact

When asked why it was important that young people have a say in their contact arrangements, young people identified that it was their right to have a say, be heard, and to feel listened to. Some young people felt that:

We should have our say. (Martin, 16)

Best thing anyone can do is just listen. (Taylor, 14)

Our case workers need to listen to us and act. (Aleisha, 16)

I don’t get to have my say, and no one listens to me. (Rob, 13)

Despite having had varied experiences with “feeling heard”, a number of young people spoke about the importance of young people feeling listened to and heard about decisions that are being made about contact, and that young people should have more control in these processes so that it is a more enjoyable and meaningful experience for them.

Because [contact] wouldn’t be enjoyable if you didn’t [have a say], and isn’t that the point? (Rob, 13)

If the decision is made without the child’s input they can start to feel left out and like their opinion doesn’t matter, if feels like they are down graded. If they cannot have a say in simple things like contact then how can they have a say in more important things. (Aleisha, 16)

Let them be free to make their own decisions. (Paul, 15)

Let [young people] figure it out themselves. (Jack, 16)

Have kids decide for kids what they want to do. Let the kids choose their contact and customise it the way they like. Absolutely everything, who what when where. (Taylor, 14)

One young person spoke about it being important for young people to have say in their contact in order to enhance feelings of safety and to consider how young people are feeling in their contact.

[Having a say in contact] is quite important - because if the contact isn't going how they like it, they should be able to change it. Young people might feel threatened and bad things can happen, they might feel unsafe. They need to be able to have a say in case they feel unsafe. (Taylor, 14)

Providing opportunity for young people to give feedback about their contact

Whilst the vast majority of young people agreed that it was important for young people to have a say in, and feedback about their contact, when asked about the ways that this currently happened, young people's responses were varied. This reflected differences in the way that young people are currently engaged in case and care planning processes.

A number of young people stated that they didn't feel that they could rely on their caseworkers to ensure that they could have a say in contact; however most said that their preferred way to feedback about contact was by talking to their caseworker.

I would talk to my caseworker about contact, but they change like every 3 months so I don't even know who they are to be able to discuss it. (Adam, 12)

My case worker is far away so I don't get a say at all. (Leo, 12)

You know they won't listen. (Rob, 13)

I feel like I was sort of listened to [about contact with my parents]...and it happened a month later....But I've had no say about contact with siblings, and feel my case manager doesn't want to know about it. (Taylor, 14)

A number of children and young people stated that they would like to provide feedback about their contact, directly to their contact supervisor or caseworker, preferably face to face, about their contact arrangements.

People should come over and ask us. (Adam, 12)

Talking to my supervisor at my contact visit then they can they talk to my caseworker. (Monica, 12)

They should be talking to you face to face, so the caseworker can actually see how you are feeling. (Aleisha, 16)

Talking on phone with the caseworker or face to face would be good. (Dee, 13)

One young person also recommended a type of feedback form which would allow regular consideration of the young person’s feelings about contact, and ways that gradual changes could be made.

Some kind of form that you fill out every month or two, to see how it is going, and how the child is feeling about the contact, what suggestions the child has for improvements. If it is done that way the Department can make small changes to contact over the time instead of just making really huge changes all at once. (Aleisha, 16)

These comments indicate the importance of providing regular opportunities for young people to feedback about the contact that they are having, and the role that the caseworker plays in ensuring that young people feel listened to and heard about their contact experiences.

Role of care planning

It is written into policy and practice guidelines within the Department that children and young people should be involved in care planning processes, and have the opportunity to discuss their needs and wishes across all areas of their lives, including contact with family members and significant others. However, when asked about their involvement in care planning, some young people did not know what a care plan was, and some others felt that this process didn’t necessarily allow them to have a say about their contact decisions.

Some participants felt that the current structure and process of care planning didn’t always allow for meaningful participation of children and young people, but that this could be a good opportunity to ensure contact decisions were being made and agreed upon by all parties.

Sometimes when I got there everyone in my family is there and I can’t say things in front of them because I don’t want to upset them. Eg, if I say I want to stay with my foster parents that will upset my mum and dad. I’ve asked for different meetings. (Rob, 13)

Care plans need to be more sufficient. There needs to be less people, everyone is there sometimes, but it should just be the most important guys. Also it needs to be less boring. (Jack, 16)

Care planning should be involved [in contact decisions] and then it is written down in writing and then it has had to be signed off by all people involved. (Aleisha, 16)

Support for children and young people after contact

As identified by some of the participants, contact can sometimes be a confusing, challenging, and mixed experience for children and young people.

Sometimes contact is very overwhelming. (Leah, 16)

It used to be really, really emotional after contact. Comfort would be good. (Jessica, 17)

Some participants felt that there could be better follow up and support for children and young people after contact to ensure that they are feeling safe and well.

Caseworkers and parents should be supporting you after – asking simple questions how are you feeling, what can we improve for next time. Taking into account your opinion...maybe have a treat for the young kids when they get home. (Aleisha, 16)

After ask us if we need to talk to a counsellor and if they want to have contact so we feel in control of it. And actually ask if they wanna talk about it or if they don't. (Leah, 16)

Some young people felt that carers played an important role in supporting young people after contact, and that it was important for carers to be particularly sensitive to how a young person is feeling after contact.

Carers should be more sensitive and more understanding after contact. (Leah, 16)

I get home from visits and am asked too many questions. (Lisa, 16)

Communication with YP regarding contact decisions

Many children and young people identified that it was vital that adequate information and communication about contact arrangements and decisions be given to children and young people, to ensure that they feel adequately prepared for, and supported, throughout the process of contact. This included communicating the details of contact with children and young people, plans that could enhance their feeling of safety during contact, and understanding the reasons behind contact decisions and any changes that have taken place (e.g., supervision, frequency etc.).

Preparation for contact

An area that was explored with young people was how prepared they felt for contact, and whether or not they felt they had adequate information about their contact arrangements and decisions.

Some children and young people felt that they only received nominal information about their contact arrangements, for example, when and what time, but not necessarily why those arrangements had been made.

I'd only get told if they were coming and what time...I don't usually get why or why not a FRE is there but I'm fine with that. (Taylor, 14)

I get information that they're coming, but not with much notice. (Rob, 13)

You get told who's going to be there, what time it starts, how long. (Tim, 13)

Some young people stated that they wanted to be consulted prior to contact happening to ensure that they understood all arrangements, including changes, and that this would allow young people to feel more control over the contact.

They should be telling you what they're going to change and seeing how you feel about it. Also telling you why they're changing it. (Jessica, 17)

Actually sit down with you and go through it thoroughly with you, the time the place when, does it fit in with what you're doing, if it is cancelled why it was, and what steps will be taken to get contact going again, and ask you how you are feeling and what you actually want. (Aleisha, 16)

Knowing why

Young people felt that often decisions were made about contact, changes were made, or contacts were cancelled without their being given a proper explanation as to why.

It's your contact, it's your right to know. (Jack, 16)

Some young people stated that decisions were made about contact, including who they could have contact with, contacts being cancelled, etc., and that it was their right to know the reasons behind decisions and for this to be communicated to them.

I don't get told why it has been cancelled, but you have the right to know why.....I'm also not allowed to have contact with my older brother, but DCP have not explained why. (Taylor, 14)

I want to see my mum. I don't know why I can't. (Aleisha, 16)

I never get told a proper reason why it is cancelled, or it's sugar coated, I never get told the real reason. (Aleisha, 16)

When you are younger you don't think about it, but when you get older like 14 you start to realise and start to ask questions like why. (James, 15)

For some young people, not being provided with information about "why" led to false assumptions, or blaming themselves for contact not happening.

I feel like my parents don't love me when it is cancelled. (Dee, 13)

It gets the children worked up when there is no information. (Adam, 12)

They sugar coat the reason [it got cancelled] but never explain it thoroughly, so then I think it is my fault. (Aleisha, 16)

When contact was being reintroduced after a lapse for a period of time, young people felt it was especially important for information to be provided to them about why there had been a lapse in contact.

We don't have visits around court cases, and it's not explained why there are no visits. (Lisa, 16)

They should be told why there is a gap in the contact is happening.....It can be difficult to have long contact and be expected to sit in a room and talk to my mum for two hours. (Taylor, 14)

If contact is out of the blue, why has this been arranged? (Aleisha, 16)

They should warn you about it shouldn't be a surprise, and explain to why they are coming back into your life, and how to ask them why. (Leah, 16)

Communication between adults

As well as communicating with young people, participants also identified the importance of communication within the Department, with agencies, carers, and also with parents and family members, to make sure everyone is on the same page about the contact arrangements, and that information is being shared.

Share a bit of the casenotes with the family. I was saying I wasn't wanting to see my Dad but they (Department) don't tell my mum and dad. (Jack, 16)

Communication, communication, communication! I shouldn't have to chase my caseworker up to make sure there is a driver! I have missed out on contact because drivers haven't turned up. (Lisa, 16)

There needs to be better communication from DCP with agencies. Say if you're with Wanslea, you have to check with them, then they have to wait to hear back from DCP. (John, 15)

DCP could speak to parents more and support families more. (John, 15)

And make sure everyone knows what's going on! If you say I can have a sleep over with someone, make a note of it so that others know! Otherwise it's not fair. (Lisa, 16)

Supervision of contact

A number of young people spoke at length about the awkwardness that they experience when their contact is being supervised, and that it affected their ability to communicate freely and openly with family members. Young people made some suggestions about how this could look, including the supervision being more discrete, and not being so closely observed or "followed" by the worker.

[It's better if] the case worker doesn't sit right next to you! Sit at a table next to you, so you feel like you can actually hanging out with your family. (Leah, 16)

If the situation is unsafe, discreetly supervise contact. (Taylor, 14)

You can't speak freely, you can't say half the things you want to because DCP listen to

I don't like getting judged by the caseworker. I want to have one on one time and be able to say whatever I want. I also don't like being followed by a caseworker. I can go to the toilet by myself!
(Martin, 16)

They might feel more vulnerable with what they have to say if someone is watching them. (Jessica, 17)

It sometimes feels weird [when a support worker is there]. (Crystal, 15)

Sometimes a person won't speak up if a caseworker is there.
(Shayla, 13)

Where contact was being supervised, some young people suggested prior planning and discussions between supervisors and young people so that the workers were better prepared to respond to young people's needs during contact.

Before contact [the worker should talk to you to] ask if you want them to stay close or not, so you feel more control, so you feel like you know what is going to happen, it makes us feel safe. (Leah, 16)

Have a code with your support worker. That way they can sit a table away and know when you need them.
(Aleisha, 16)

They should talk about what could happen in their situation with their parent, if a bad situation could happen, and if it does what will happen, to make the child feel safer.
(Leah, 16)

They should.....have some kind of safety in case something does go wrong.
(Aleisha, 16)

Young people also highlighted the importance of having a good understanding about why their contact was supervised, or why there were changes in the supervision of their contact.

Contact is always supervised but it's never explained why.... my mum would never do anything to us. (Dee, 13)

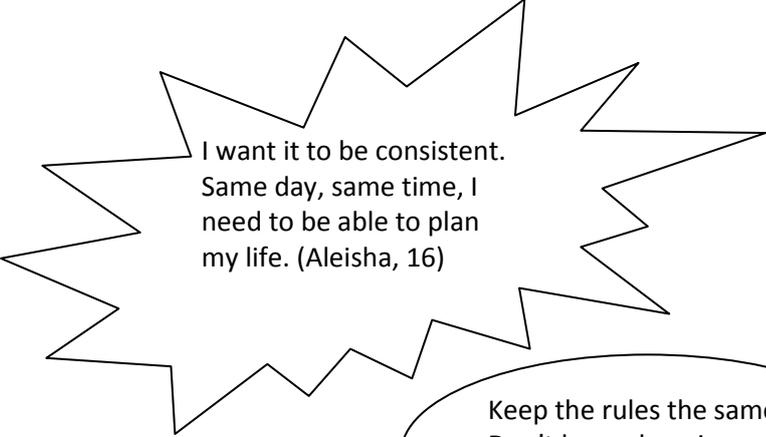
I guess it's supervised because [your parents] might sneak their number to you or organise a meet up, but it's not explained why. (Martin, 16)

Sometimes it would change from unsupervised to supervised, and you won't really know why. (Kayla, 15)

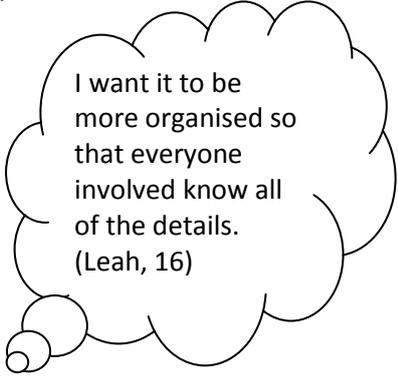
I don't know the reasons at all...it's just generic responses, never about your circumstances. (Aleisha, 16)

Consistency and reliability

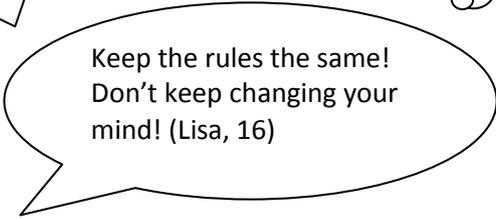
Young people highlighted that it was vital that contact arrangements were planned out, consistent and reliable to be able to better fit in for, and support, young people.



I want it to be consistent. Same day, same time, I need to be able to plan my life. (Aleisha, 16)

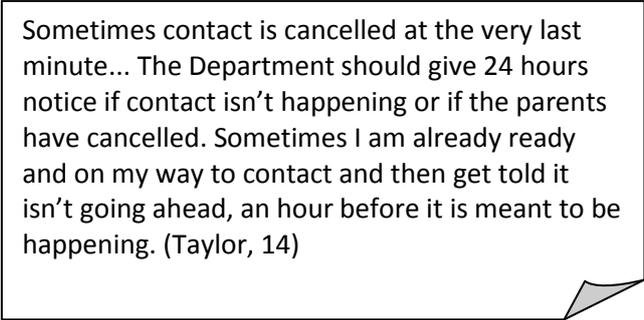


I want it to be more organised so that everyone involved know all of the details. (Leah, 16)

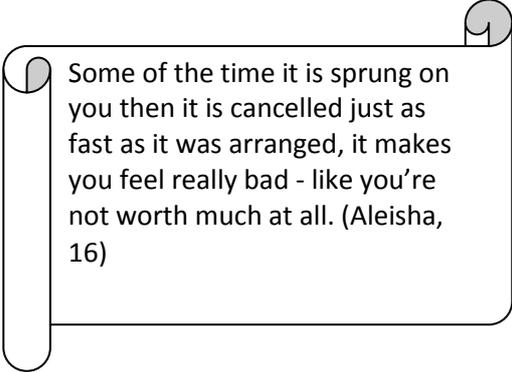


Keep the rules the same! Don't keep changing your mind! (Lisa, 16)

A number of young people felt that the nature of contact was quite last minute, and that it was often arranged or cancelled without much notice. One young person suggested that 24 hours be given if contact isn't happening to better assist young people.

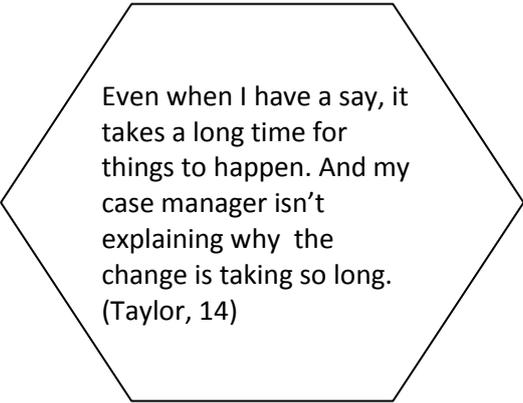


Sometimes contact is cancelled at the very last minute... The Department should give 24 hours notice if contact isn't happening or if the parents have cancelled. Sometimes I am already ready and on my way to contact and then get told it isn't going ahead, an hour before it is meant to be happening. (Taylor, 14)

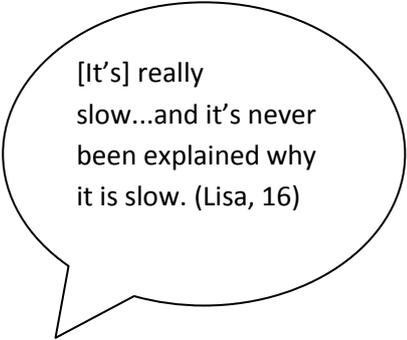


Some of the time it is sprung on you then it is cancelled just as fast as it was arranged, it makes you feel really bad - like you're not worth much at all. (Aleisha, 16)

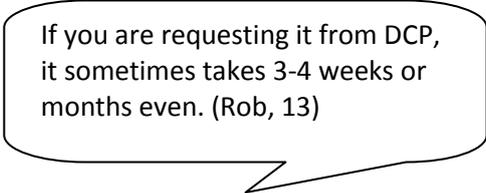
Some participants also expressed frustration about the length of time taken to follow up on their requests for contact with family members, and some suggested that they would have liked information about why the process was taking so long.



Even when I have a say, it takes a long time for things to happen. And my case manager isn't explaining why the change is taking so long. (Taylor, 14)



[It's] really slow...and it's never been explained why it is slow. (Lisa, 16)



If you are requesting it from DCP, it sometimes takes 3-4 weeks or months even. (Rob, 13)

Summary of the views of children and young people

As contact arrangements for children and young people are varied depending on the situation within their family, it is vital that the individual needs and opinions of each child or young person are given consideration and importance in the planning and delivery of family contact arrangements. Family contact arrangements need to be child-focused and centred on the needs, desires, and wishes of the child.

Children and young people have their own perspectives about what they want from contact and the way that it should look, and although it may not be possible for this to be achieved, it is important that their views are heard and explored in order to deliver contact which is the most meaningful for that child and young person. Contact should promote the most positive connection for that child or young person with their family members. This includes providing opportunities for children and young people to provide regular feedback about how their contact is working for them, as well as identifying appropriate ways to elicit that feedback, such as through regular communication (e.g., Quarterly Care reports), care planning, or other avenues.

It is important that children and young people feel supported throughout the process of contact, and that they feel adequately prepared prior to contact occurring. This support can be extended by “checking in” with young people after contact to see how they are feeling, and by seeing if they would like to discuss contact. It is important that carers, caseworkers, and contact supervisors provide children and young people with the opportunity to feedback after contact if the child wishes to, and that this happens in a way that is sensitive and responsive to the child or young person’s needs following contact.

Whilst contact decisions should be made in consultation with children and young people, it is also important that decisions about contact are clearly communicated to young people. This includes communicating clearly the specific details of contact, as well as “why”, and how those decisions have been reached. It is important that workers are able to have open and transparent conversations with children and young people, so that young people do not blame themselves for contact changes. It is also particularly important that where there had been a lapse in contact, young people were properly consulted before it was reintroduced, and that they are given some explanation as to why there had been a gap. Good communication and information sharing between different stakeholders and adults (e.g., workers, carers, family members, etc.) is also important to ensure that there is a shared understanding about contact, and that contact is occurring in a way that is consistent with the decisions that have been made.

Although some young people felt that supervised contact sometimes made them feel awkward, they also acknowledged the important role that a worker can play in supporting young people in the contact process. In particular, where there had been prior discussion and decisions made about how this supervision might occur, young people reported that they could communicate with their worker during contact if they were concerned. It is also important that it is explained to children and young people why contact is being supervised, and/or why there may have been changes.

For children and young people to feel prepared for contact, and for it to have the most minimal disruption to their lives, it is important that contact is consistent and reliable, and that there is adequate notice given where there are cancellations of contact. It is also important to young people for contact arrangements to be regular and consistent so that they feel some control over this, and so that they can plan around it. It is also necessary for young people to feel that their requests for contact are followed up within an appropriate time frame, and where decisions are complicated or where contact cannot be arranged in an appropriate time frame, that this is clearly articulated.

It is vital that the voices and opinions of children and young people are given priority in decisions that are being made about contact. If contact is to be a truly meaningful experience for children and young people, and if the aim of contact is to assist young people to develop and maintain their



connections to family, then it is important that their feedback is sought and incorporated into decision making to ensure the most positive experience for that child or young person.