



# Family time in Out of Home Care (OOHC)

For children and families with a permanency goal of restoration, please refer to the [DCJ Restoration page](#) for information on family time.

## Key messages

- Family time connects people who love and care about a child<sup>2</sup>
- Spending time with siblings can enhance positive, healthy relationships and promote a child’s family and cultural identity
- Family time is not a one-size-fits all approach, it should be based on the child’s needs
- When carers and parents support and encourage family time it can prevent a child feeling the tension of ‘divided loyalties’
- Carer qualities such as openness and empathy contribute to positive outcomes for children, as carers and parents can forge a new type of kinship network

## What is family time?

Family time describes the many ways children can connect with their birth family and their wider network, when they cannot live at home. Family time helps children to heal, it helps children to learn about their culture, their history and their health. Importantly children learn that they remain connected to people who are important to them, even if they can’t live with them.

Family time can be:

Direct	Indirect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• face-to-face visits</li><li>• phone calls</li><li>• FaceTime or Skype calls</li><li>• overnight stays</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• text messages</li><li>• talking through social media, or exchanging gifts</li><li>• photographs, letters, online gaming and videos</li></ul>

Having different options allows children to have as much family time as they need.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term ‘child’ or ‘children’ to refer to children and young people from birth to age 18.

Family time can be spent with parents, siblings and other significant people in a child's life, such as relatives, Elders, previous carers, neighbours, friends from previous schools, family friends or even pets. Family time is every child's right, and carers can have varying roles in relation to arranging and coordinating it based on the permanency goal for the child. All carers should encourage family time, if safe to do so.

## The benefits of family time

- Improves a child's sense of belonging
- Eases the pain of separation and loss for a child or young person, their family and significant others
- Can reduce the child or young person's sense of abandonment
- Eases stress of divided loyalties and loneliness
- Helps children process grief and loss
- Grows self-esteem
- Supports the child's identity
- Helps children feel valued and cherished
- Reduces the stigma of 'being in care'
- Children with life-long connections have improved future physical and mental health outcomes
- Helps children make sense of their life story
- Provides opportunities to create healthy memories
- Helps children to remain connected to their culture
- Provides children with diverse experiences
- Helps develop a large, lifelong network of support.

## What the research says

Regular family time offers children continuity in their lives and can reduce the impact of separation (Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). Face to face or direct family time preserves and strengthens a child's connections to family, kin and community (Wright and Collings, 2019).

Family time helps keep children connected to their culture and build a more complete picture of who they are and where they come from, which promotes a positive identity (Marien, 2011). Children often worry about their family. Staying in touch helps to reassure them that their family is okay and still connected. It helps children stay informed about important changes within their family and community (Sen and Broadhurst, 2011).

Family time works best when both the birth family and carers are respectful, open and focused on meeting the child's needs. Research shows that when carers and birth family members organise family time independently, it is more sustainable and organic for the child (Neil et al, 2011). Caseworkers play a pivotal role in engaging parents and guiding carers to collaborate (Collings & Wright, 2022). Caseworkers can support parents by sharing information about family time, helping them prepare and talking through their thoughts and feelings about their role in family time (Salveron, 2012).

Caseworkers can also support carers in developing their understanding of the role parents play in the child's life. For example, caseworkers can be involved in establishing a process of information sharing between parents and carers (Collings & Wright, 2022). Caseworkers can also provide practical support to carers and parents after visits for debriefing and guidance, if required.

Carers who respect, support and encourage family time can prevent a child feeling the tension of 'divided loyalties'. The best arrangement is when everyone feels family time has an important purpose (Young and Neil, 2009). Research shows that carer qualities such as openness and empathy contribute to positive outcomes for children, as carers and parents can forge a new type of kinship network (Brodzinsky, 2005).

Recent research from the Pathways of Longitudinal Study (PoCLS, 2022) found that children who spent time with both or at least one parent had better socio-emotional wellbeing than children who didn't have family time with either parent. Overall the findings indicate that sustained family time and close relationships with carers and family are associated with better socio-emotional outcomes.

A child-centred approach asks us to consider the individual and unique needs of every child we work with. A recent webinar about family time from the Fostering Lifelong Connections project can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upoWYgwxf0s>.

## Spending time with siblings

Due to their shared experience, sometimes siblings are the only people who truly understand. A brother or sister is sometimes the child's primary attachment in the family. Spending time with siblings can enhance positive, healthy relationships and promote a child's family and cultural identity (Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). This includes any siblings who are born after the child has removed from their family.

Sibling relationships are not limited to biological relationships. They may include half-siblings, step-siblings, kin who are classified as siblings or others who are identified as siblings due to their psychological or social importance (Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005).

Connections are strengthened if family time is maintained in a range of ways. As well as face-to-face family time, a carer can support the child to write letters or cards, do drawings, send emails, talk on the phone or use video calls. A carer can also display family photos, cook using family recipes, spend time with the child's mob or cultural community, and share achievements such as school awards.

It is essential that carers are supported to understand the importance of the child's attachment to their birth family and need for information about their identity. This might be demonstrated in how they talk with the child or young person about their family and any communication they have.

## What is ‘openness’?

‘Openness’ refers to the way a child is supported to remain connected to their parents, brothers, sisters, extended family, culture and religion. Openness is an attitude that goes beyond visits and phone calls. Meaningful openness recognises and values the relationship between the child, their family, and their carer’s family.

Children who are in out of home care know and are able to ask questions about who they are and where they come from. They are supported to participate and learn about their family’s culture and traditions and can see that their carers family embraces their family and life story. Children need the opportunity to be comfortable to speak openly and respectfully about both of their families through their growing years.

## Things to consider

### Cultural considerations in family time

It is important to remember that some Aboriginal families have experienced traumatic interventions and overly intrusive supervision by DCJ. Whenever possible, family time for Aboriginal children is supervised by Aboriginal practitioners or by family/kin or Aboriginal community members who can create an environment where a child can get the most out of family time.

Whenever possible, family time for an Aboriginal child or child with a refugee or migrant background includes cultural experiences in which they can participate in with their parents or family/kin.

### Family Finding

Family Finding is a model developed by Kevin Campbell in the United States. The model seeks to connect children with birth family and other supportive adults who will love and care about them now and throughout their lives. Without these connections, children are vulnerable to experiencing isolation and loneliness.

Family Finding highlights the importance of emotional permanency for children and the sense of security and belonging that enduring relationships provide. It helps to develop the child’s family tree, ensure that birth family connections are sustained and significant family events are known and celebrated.

Family finding asks practitioners to work with urgency to pursue meaningful and permanent relationships for children. It uses tools such as mobility mapping to gather information about a child’s historical and current social network. When caseworkers commit to family finding, children can be connected with their birth family and family time can be arranged.

DCJ caseworkers will find more information about Family Finding on Casework Practice and NGO caseworkers can find this information on the PSP learning hub.

## Sharing information

Family time works best when adults support a child to have relationships with all of the people who are important to them. Mutual acceptance of each family's role in the child's life – and empathy for each other's experience – are the keys to enabling these relationships.

Family time has the best outcomes when families are kept up-to-date about significant events in the child's life. This could include health issues, educational achievements, photos, and ways the child is connecting with their culture. Carers support and nurture the parents' connection when they include parents in important events in their child's life. In turn they build relationships and provide meaningful conversation topics for the child and family to share.

## Preparation

Family time needs careful planning. The type and frequency of connections should be determined by the needs of the child. Factors to be considered include the child's expressed wishes, age and maturity, and the reasons they can't live with their parents (Schofield and Stevenson, 2009). Preparation is vital for success. Children, carers and families need to work together to agree how they will be in touch and how often.

Spend some time planning each visit with parents and talk to them about what they hope they and their child will get out of it. Include family time supervision in these conversations where appropriate. Support parents to set goals for family time, plan activities and reflect afterwards about what worked well for their family and what strengths parents feel they could build on next time.

Decisions about the type, level and frequency of family time should reflect the case plan goal, be in the best interests of the child and not place them at further risk of harm.

After family time, open conversations with everyone involved can be helpful to understand what worked well and what needs to be different for the next time. Check in with the child about how they experience family time, what they enjoy, what they would like to do more of and what they would like to be different.

Talking about what worked well and what may need to change helps to build and maintain respectful relationships and ensures everyone feels their needs have been considered.

## Location

Face-to-face family visits should occur in comfortable locations that are familiar for children, where safe to do so. Visits should occur at a location that allows families to interact with their child and provides access to age-appropriate activities. This could include a park or a venue that provides an activity that everyone can join (e.g. bowling, skating). For some children, visits may also include parents attending school award ceremonies, watching sporting games or visiting the child in their home.

Family time for Aboriginal children and young people should be held on Country, where possible. Funding for travel costs should be discussed during planning and when developing Financial Plans, especially when a permanent legal option is being considered.

## Frequency

The amount of family time that a child enjoys should be planned to enable all of the benefits outlined above. Final orders should not disrupt effective arrangements. After orders, carers are guided by the agreed care plan that includes the expected frequency of family visits. Sometimes the Children's Court or Supreme Court make arrangements compulsory through a Contact Order (for guardianship) or a Registered Adoption Plan (for adoption). This can give parents reassurance about the minimum number of visits they will have.

Carers should think of the care plan or adoption plan as a minimum commitment. If visits are positive for the child, additional family time is likely to benefit everyone. When a child is in long term care, a carer would discuss additional family time with the child's caseworker. Guardians or adoptive parents are free to negotiate and arrange extra time after the guardianship or adoption order has been made.

## What if family time is not safe right now?

Family time is not a one-size-fits all approach. It should reflect the permanency goal for a child and meet their needs. Sometimes face to face or direct communication with parents or members of the child's birth family may not be safe. A court order may also prevent certain people having any time or connection to the child due to risk of harm or safety concerns for the child. If there are court orders in place restricting contact, these orders need to be followed.

It is important for carers to be encouraged to discuss any safety or risk concerns with their caseworker when they are thinking about guardianship or open adoption. Remember, guardians and adoptive families will be independently supporting children to maintain family relationships after a guardianship or adoption order is made.

Caseworkers can provide carers with support to develop their relationship with the birth family and initiate family time. Establishing this relationship may take considerable time, openness and empathy.

If family time is not able to proceed face to face or in any other form, it is important for carers to keep a record of all the times contact was attempted. It is important that carers are making continuous and genuine attempts to facilitate contact between the child and their birth family. A carer's dedicated attitude towards family time is at the centre of a successful guardianship or open adoption.

Sometimes, children and young people may want to have a break from direct, face to face family time. In these circumstances, it is helpful for carers to maintain connections with parents and other family members. This can be through text messaging or social media, sharing photographs of milestones and keeping the child's life story records up to date.

Maintaining this connection, where it is safe to do so, means that the child can reconnect with their family in the future.

## Tips to keep children and young people connected

<b>Carers</b>	<b>Family</b>
Write letters to the child's family	Write letters to carers and your child
Call the child's family to plan family visits. Have activities to do in the event the parent is unable to provide this	Prepare things to do with your child (e.g. beading, puzzles, ball games, cards, art, colouring books)
Request photos of the child's family and display them around the home	Share family photos with your child and their carer's family
Provide significant family members with regular information about the child's wellbeing, including health, education and connection to culture	Consider what your child might like to learn about your family, e.g. people and stories from the past
If safe to do so, invite the child's family to significant events, such as cultural events, birthday parties, school and sporting events	Find local cultural events or events that are significant for your family and suggest them as family visit opportunities
Discuss the child's family in a positive way and speak openly with the child about their family	Have a positive view of the carer raising your child and speak openly to the child about their carer
Request cultural information from the family, (e.g. family recipes, cultural festivals, totems, books) and share these with the child	Work on art together or write and read stories together, doing things together helps people get to know each other
Share the child's Life Story Book with their family	Take photos at family visits, make a photo book to share
Commit to visits and always attend. Notify family ASAP if unable to attend	Commit to visits and always attend whenever possible. Notify carer ASAP if you can't attend
Incorporate symbolic displays such as family photos and shared rituals within the home	Provide carer with family photos to place around the home

# Community supports for carers and families to build positive connections

## Family Relationships

A federal government initiative to help families build better relationships.

1800 050 321, <https://www.familyrelationships.gov.au/>

## Legal Aid NSW

Legal advice and conflict resolution/mediation.

1300 888 529, [www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/](http://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/)

## Local GP

Support and counselling is available via a mental health plan through your local GP. For more information, speak to your GP or visit <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/mental-health-care-plan>

## Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

Provides a range of services to children, adolescents and their families with a range of difficulties impacting their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

1800 011 511, <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/Pages/services-camhs.aspx>

## Create Foundation

Support providing opportunities for children in care to connect with each other.

1800 655 105, <https://create.org.au/>

## Family Connect and Support

Supports and services to families as early as possible to keep children and young people safe and well.

1300 006 480, <https://www.familyconnectsupport.dcj.nsw.gov.au/>

## headspace

headspace provide early intervention mental health services to 12-25 year olds focused on mental health, physical health, alcohol and other drug services and work and study support.

1800 650 890, <https://headspace.org.au/>

## Interrelate

Provide a range of relationship services that aim to empower people to live and relate more effectively, specialising in supporting parents and children.

1300 473 528, <https://www.interrelate.org.au/>



## Kids Helpline

Support for young people, including support for friendships and relationships, family issues, bullying and cyberbullying, school and study stress, gender identity, sexuality, mental health, feeling sad or upset, body issues, or safety.

1800 55 1800, <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>

## Legal Aid Helpline for under 18s

Legal advice and information for young people under 18.

1800 10 18 10, <https://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/what-we-do/criminal-law/youth-hotline>

## Lifeline

Crisis support line that is available 24 hours / 7 days - Australia's largest crisis support line. Anyone in Australia can speak to a trained Crisis Supporter over the phone, any time of the day or night.

13 11 14, <https://www.lifeline.org.au/>

## My Forever Family NSW

Provide support, training and services for carers in NSW.

1300 782 975, <https://www.myforeverfamily.org.au/>

## Parent line NSW

A free telephone counselling and support service for parents and carers with children aged 0 to 18 who live in NSW.

1300 1300 52, <https://www.parentline.org.au/>

## Relationships Australia

Provide a range of support services to support the development of respectful relationships.

1300 364 277, <https://relationships.org.au/>

## Research Centre for Children and Families (RCCF)

A research centre based at Sydney University undertaking research with children, young people and families with a focus on the human services sector.

Tips sheet and resources developed as part of the Fostering Lifelong Connections study:

<https://rccf-fostering-connections.sydney.edu.au/links-to-relevant-resources/>