



Why Family Contact is Important and How You Can Use it to Help Your Family

Frequent, quality family contact with your child helps you stay connected and builds your family's protective factors. It supports your child's growth and sense of belonging in your family and is the key to your child coming home to you and safely staying home.

Make the most of your family contact by:

- Starting your time together with a greeting that includes a short fun activity with quick questions that help your child feel comfortable.
- Leading activities that support your child's developmental level.
- With the support of your family contact facilitator, identifying and doing "resiliency activities" that help build on your strengths as a parent. Resiliency means you can manage your stress or troubles looming in your life so you can stay in the moment with your child.
- Talking about daily routines and how your family culture is expressed in day-to-day actions or activities you are doing or are looking forward to doing during the visit.
- Identifying members of your community who could be family time supporters.
- Talking about how the family contact event went before everyone leaves so you can notice together what went well and what you'd like to do differently together next time.

Together with your Office of Children's Services (OCS) caseworker, you will develop a family contact plan. This plan outlines many important details about your contact with your child, including who will be participating, the level of supervision, and locations where contact will occur. You and your OCS caseworker should modify this plan regularly throughout your case to reflect changing safety needs.

Before Family Contact



Before your first family contact event, talk with your caseworker and family contact facilitator about:

- Visitors (including pets) who are allowed or not allowed to attend
- Bringing items such as toys, food, or gifts to family contact, what types are allowed, and how often you can bring these items
- Permissions needed to take photos and video/audio recordings
- Using your cell phone during family contact (*continued*)

- Taking your child to the restroom or diaper changing during family contact
- Meaningful age and developmentally appropriate activities you could do with your child
- Transportation for you and your child
- Your understanding about substance use and how that might impact the family contact
- Your preferred ways of receiving support or feedback during family contact
- Goals you have for your time with your child and what [resiliency activities](https://keepconnected.searchinstitute.org/bringing-out-the-best-in-your-family/) may help make and keep connections strong between you and your child. The Keep Connected website has ideas at: <https://keepconnected.searchinstitute.org/bringing-out-the-best-in-your-family/>.

During Family Contact



Each family contact event should flow in the same way, following the same sequence. This keeps the events predictable for you and your child. It also helps create feelings of safety and security. Each event should flow as follows:



Each family has different traditions and ways of parenting. Talk with your family contact facilitator about how they can support you in incorporating your parenting methods and family traditions into your family contact. There may be additional resources available and OCS can connect you to those.

During family contact, you are responsible for your own behavior, for the child's belongings, and for following family contact expectations set up in your family contact plan.

Depending on the level of supervision determined for your family by your OCS caseworker, OCS may approve various types of cost-free settings such as the family home, a local restaurant, a family member's home, church, park, library, or community center. Family contact may also include events such as a birthday party or cultural ceremony for the child or parent. When required by the OCS caseworker, a family contact facilitator or family contact supporter will be present to give positive guidance and offer you suggestions.

All people involved in family contact need to follow suggested health department guidelines.

As the parent, remind your child that you are safe so your child does not worry about you. You can help support this message by doing activities such as drawing a picture of what you and child will do together the next time you see each other. Your child could also draw a picture of how family contact went for them and what they enjoyed doing with you that day.

Be aware that sometimes family contact needs to end sooner than expected. For example:

- Your child might become very distressed and behaviorally out of control beyond the typical distress you would expect to see because they are separated from you.
- You are not following the expectations that were set out ahead of time.
- One of you is at risk of physical or emotional harm.

Contact your OCS caseworker if your child has been injured, a critical incident has happened, or an event has happened that put you at risk of harm.



Right After the Family Contact Event



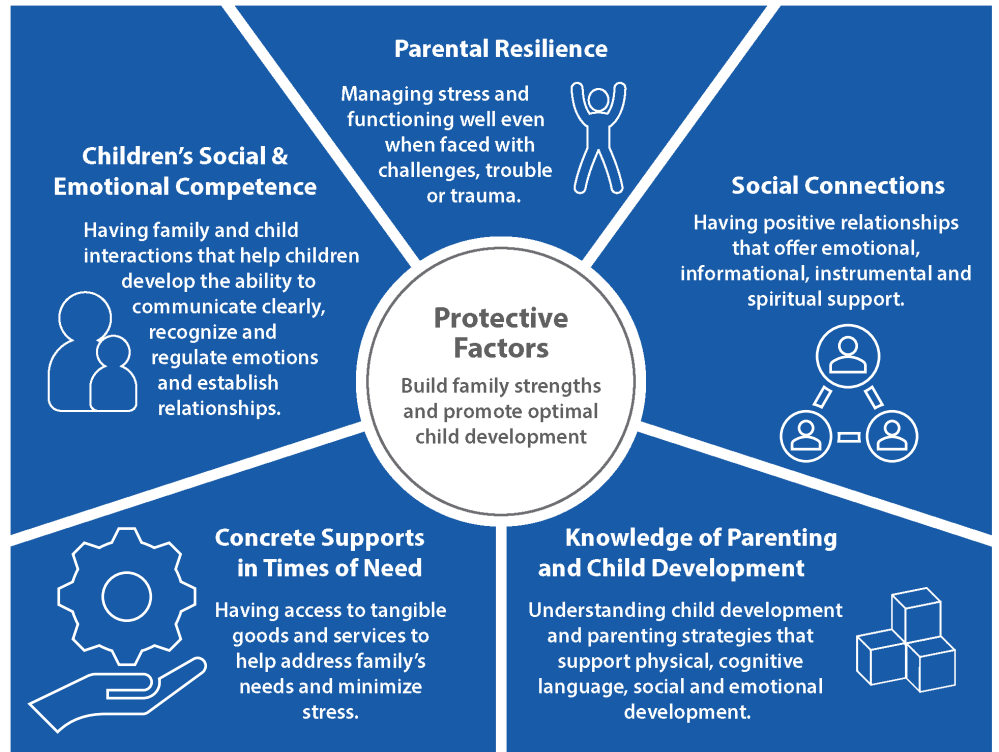
If you have any concerns or suggestions, you are encouraged to reach out to your caseworker, including if you believe your child would benefit from additional help, such as counseling services. You are encouraged to share your feelings and observations about how family contact went. Consider what worked well for you and your child and what worries you might have.

It is normal for your child to be upset after family contact, because they are separated from you. You should stay aware of your child's emotional needs and be prepared to anticipate these feelings and offer your child positive support. Ways to offer support include consoling your child when they cry or offering calming words and touches when they are expressing anger or refusing to cooperate with directions.

Follow-Up Before the Next Family Contact Event

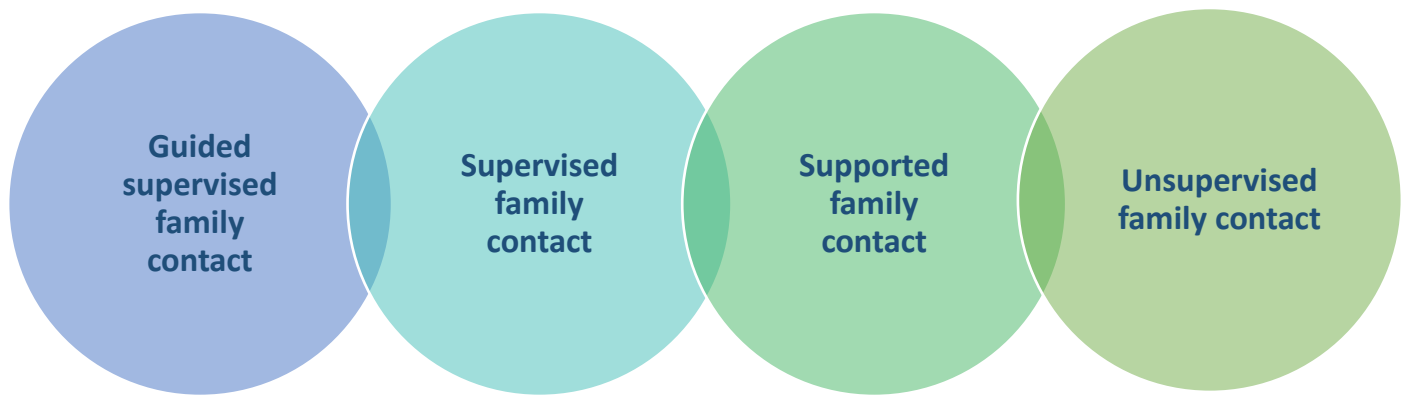
You and the family contact facilitator or family contact supporter should talk after each event to help prepare you and your child for the next family contact and to follow-up on any commitments made. During this follow-up conversation, you are encouraged to focus on protective factors and how you and your child can build on these factors. The five protective factors that keep a family strong are:

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Supports in Times of Need
- Children's Social and Emotional Competence



Family Contact Supervision Levels

Family contact supervision levels depend upon the unique situation of each parent and child. Child safety is the priority in deciding what level of supervision is needed when family contact first begins after your child has gone into foster care. Decisions about supervision level are made after considering your child's safety needs, your child's developmental needs, and parent success in addressing the need for foster care. Your OCS caseworker decides the level of supervision needed. The levels of family contact, from most to least supervised, are:



This level is established when a family needs teaching and coaching on healthy and positive parent/child interactions. Families involved with the Families with Infants and Toddlers (FIT) court usually have this level of family contact. The parent is directly coached by a well-trained family contact facilitator. This level helps a parent learn or strengthen effective parenting skills.

At this level, the family contact is well-planned, because there is a risk to the child's physical, mental, or emotional safety or well-being. Family contact is supervised by a family contact facilitator who is ready to step in right away and is always in sight and sound of the child. This level is used when the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering harm during family contact. Supervising the family contact helps keep the child physically and emotionally safe. The parent is provided with help to build and keep positive relationships with their child and maintaining ongoing relationships with siblings is encouraged.

At this level, someone is available to help during family contact – either a family contact facilitator or a family contact supporter - but there is no close observation happening. Family contact usually happens somewhere in the community such as a park, restaurant, or library. Often extended family members are encouraged to join in during this level of family contact.

At this level, no one observes family contact, and overnights often take place in the parent's home. The court usually encourages trial home visits at this level to confirm it is time for the family to be reunited.

If you disagree with your family contact plan or have other concerns, including worries about your child's foster home situation, you can contact your OCS caseworker by phone or email. Please share your concerns privately with your caseworker and not in front of your child.

If you have a complaint with an OCS employee that cannot be resolved informally, there is a formal complaint process. OCS aims to treat every family served with dignity and respect, including respecting the family's cultural values, and the complaint process helps ensure your concerns are heard and addressed. Go to: <http://dhss.alaska.gov/ocs/Pages/grievance/index.aspx>.

You are the Key

One of the most important actions you can take right now is to stay connected with your child. Regular and meaningful family contact builds on your protective factors. It also supports your child's growth and sense of belonging. You are the key to your child coming home to you from foster care and safely staying home. Ask for support when you need it so you can stay strong, be strong for your child, and help bring your child home.

