

Family Contact Evaluation

BASELINE REPORT | August 2021

Prepared by the Butler Institute for Families

Introduction

In 2017, the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work (Butler) partnered with Raising Our Children with Kindness (R.O.C.K.) Mat-Su and the local Office of Children’s Services (OCS) in the South-Central region of Alaska to evaluate family contact services. Family contact is important for children to build healthy and positive relationships with their families (Fein et al., 1990; Maluccio et al., 1993), and there is a growing body of research that links regular, meaningful family time for children in out-of-home care with several positive outcomes, including stronger parent engagement and a stronger likelihood that the child will be returned home and stay home successfully (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). The findings from the 2017 evaluation recommended a focus on the availability, frequency, and quality of family contact services to better serve children and their families (Longworth-Reed et al., 2017). In response to these findings, stakeholders in the Mat-Su region formed the Family Contact Improvement Partnership (FCIP) to address Butler’s recommendations. After three years collaborating on a theory of change and developing and implementing family contact best practices curriculum and trainings, Butler partnered with R.O.C.K. Mat-Su and family contact agencies in the South-Central region in 2021 to evaluate families’ experiences of their family contact events supported by a family contact facilitator or supporter. By evaluating families’ experiences of their family contact events, the partnership aims to improve the practices of professionals and community members working with families and children during contact events.

Methodology and Sample

Butler partnered with family contact facilitators and supporters, professionals and community members supporting parents and guardians during their family contact, to administer the survey. These family contact facilitators and supporters were from the local OCS, Alaska Family Services, Alaska Youth and Family Network, and the Knik Tribe. The survey was given to biological parents or legal guardians who temporarily did not have custody of their children and were visiting their children through family contact events with a family contact facilitator or supporter. The survey was available electronically via the organization’s electronic tablet or the parent/guardian’s own electronic device. The survey asked about the types and frequency of family contacts and parent/guardian experiences of family contact best practices. Questions regarding family contact best practices were informed by the [Family Contact Best Practices Guide for Professionals](#) and the [Best Practices Guide for Family Contact Supporters](#) that were created by Butler in collaboration with ROCK Mat-Su to help family contact facilitators and supporters promote frequent and quality family contact.

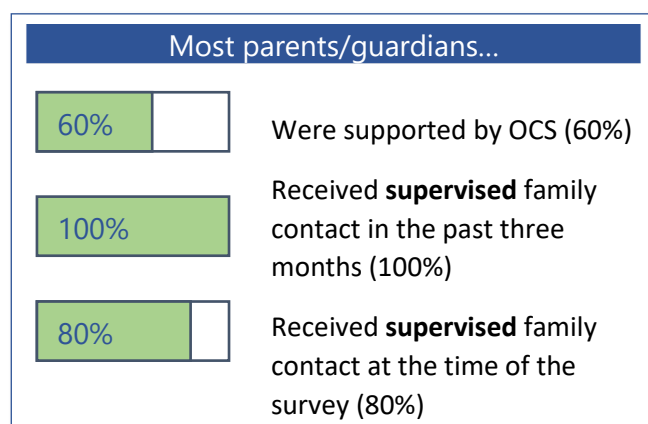
Fifteen parents/guardians completed the survey. Most were mothers (67%) between the ages of 26 – 44 (67%) who had children birth to three years old (67%). Most parents/guardians identified as White (80%), while just over a quarter (27%) identified as American Indian, and one respondent identified as Alaska Native.

Experience of Best Practices During Family Contact

All families reported receiving family contact “in-person in a family contact facilitator’s office” in the past three months, and two-thirds of families reported this type of contact occurred once a week. Parents/guardians who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native reported significantly more frequent contact with their children over video or phone calls compared to families who identified as White.¹

All families agreed they had an overall positive experience during their family contact events (31% agreeing and 69% strongly agreeing), and parents/guardians reported experiencing best practices during their family contact. Table 1 displays all mean scores for best practice items, highlighting the **highest rated item** and the **lowest rated items**. Parents/guardians highly rated their experience of feeling welcome by their facilitator or supporter during their family contact events ($M = 3.73$, between “agree” and “strongly agree”). One-third of parents/guardians reported “never” or “rarely” discussing next steps with their facilitator or supporter after their family contact. Most families reported “never” having visits in another location like “doctor visit, church or ceremony, sporting events/practice” (86%). Almost three-quarters of families also reported their contact “never” or “rarely” took place in a “natural and neutral setting” (73%). Several parent/guardian survey respondents were interested in meeting their children in a more natural setting and specifically mentioned settings like parks or family-friendly outdoor spaces at the family contact organization. Over one-quarter of parents/guardians reported their family contact facilitator or supporter does not encourage them to bring their family traditions into family contact events (27%). One person shared, “[I] never even knew it was an option” to bring their family traditions into their visits.

Overall, frequency of in-person family contact events was positively correlated with parent/guardian experiences. The more frequent the in-person contact, the more likely parents/guardians were to report positive experiences of their family contact including being involved in planning their contact, discussing their strengths, knowing when their next family contact will be, and feeling understood by their facilitator or supporter.² More frequent in-person contact was also positively correlated with experiences



“I feel a much better understanding with my facilitator than with my caseworker... there was better communication about plans for my kids.”

¹ $t(10.16) = 2.74, p < .05$.

² Planning, $r(13) = .553, p < .05$; Strengths, $r(13) = .663, p < .01$; Next contact, $r(13) = .571, p < .05$; Feeling understood, $r(13) = .863, p < .001$

Correlation is a statistic that measures the relationship between two variables. Correlation does not mean one thing causes the other but instead that the variables are related, either positively (variable 1 ↑, variable 2 ↑) or negatively (variable 1 ↑, variable 2 ↓).

the parent/guardian had with their facilitator or supporter including being coached by their facilitator or supporter on parenting skills, the facilitator or supporter encouraging interactions with their children, providing helpful ideas to support parent growth, making them feel like a good parent, and encouraging them to bring family traditions to the contact.³

There were differences in results by supporting agencies in that families who received family contact support from OCS reported significantly lower ratings on the following experiences: feeling welcome by their facilitator (OCS $M = 3.56$, Other Agencies $M = 4.00$), family contact taking place in a natural setting (OCS $M =$

1.11, Other Agencies $M = 2.83$), and their facilitator showing or coaching them on parenting skills (OCS $M = 2.67$, Other Agencies $M = 3.67$).⁴

Table 1. Mean Scores on Parent/Guardian Experiences of Their Family Contact Events

Experience	Mean*
I am engaged in planning for my family contact events with my child/ren.	3.20
I work with my family contact facilitator or supporter to set goals for my family contact events.	3.27
I discuss my strengths as a parent with my family contact facilitator or supporter.	3.07
I know when my next family contact event with my child/ren will be.	3.67
I feel welcome by my family contact facilitator or supporter during family contact events with my child/ren.	3.73
I feel understood by my family contact facilitator or supporter during family contact events with my child/ren.	3.47
After a family contact event, I discuss next steps with my family contact facilitator or supporter.	2.60
Family contact events take place in a natural and neutral setting (e.g., your /another family member's home, restaurant, church, park, library, community center, family event/ceremony)?	1.80
My family contact facilitator or supporter shows or coaches me on parenting skills (e.g., ways to talk with my child) during my family contact events.	3.07
My family contact facilitator or supporter encourages my child and me to interact with each other.	3.40
My family contact facilitator or supporter provides helpful ideas to support my growth as a parent.	3.27
My family contact facilitator or supporter makes me feel like a good parent.	3.33

³ Coaching, $r(13) = .576$, $p < .05$; Encouraging interaction, $r(13) = .702$, $p < .01$; Ideas for growth, $r(13) = .726$, $p < .01$; Feeling like a good parent, $r(13) = .607$, $p < .05$, Encouraging family traditions, $r(13) = .655$, $p < .01$

⁴ Feeling welcome, $t(8) = 2.53$, $p < .05$; Events taking place in a natural setting, $t(5.34) = 2.82$, $p < .05$; Coaching, $t(13) = 2.24$, $p < .05$

My family contact facilitator or supporter encourages me to bring my family traditions into family contact events.	3.00
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*On a scale of 1 – 4 (*never* to *always* or *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, parents and guardians reported positive experiences of family contact and feeling supported by their family contact facilitator or supporter. As facilitators and supporters are able to attend trainings and apply best practices, family contact will become more consistent and more effective. Improving family contact practices is essential to the goal of reunification under the overarching goals of reducing the recurrence of child maltreatment and improving family stability. To continue to improve family contact, facilitators and supporters can promote the following:

1. As COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, provide more opportunities for in-person family contact events in more natural settings. Per the [Best Practices Guide](#), family contact events should occur in the most homelike setting possible, or in a location the child is normally in, such as school, sports events, religious events, or medical appointments.
2. Encourage more frequent family contact. Research shows that the frequency of visitation, especially for very young children, should happen at least two times a week and ideally every day while they are away from their parents (James Bell Associates, 2009).
3. Take time to debrief next steps with parents/guardians after contact events. Per the [Best Practices Guide](#), next steps should be discussed to address any concerns raised by the child or parent and help build upon what is going well. The discussion can include questions that affirm the family contact was child-centered and culturally centered from the parent’s perspective.

References

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