

Through the eyes of a child

Grandparents raising grandchildren



Children's contact with their parents

Contact with their parents affects children's well-being. Maintaining contact can also make a difference if they are to live with their parents again. In some situations, parent-child contact may not be possible at all. In other situations, it would be best to have only supervised contact. This fact sheet is designed to help grandparents consider when and how to maintain contact between child and parent. It also suggests strategies for good visits and ways to help children make a positive transition to the changes in their lives.



Each situation is unique

There are no simple rules about contact with parents because every family is unique. For young children placed in kinship and foster care, contact with their parents should¹

- begin as soon as possible,
- take place as often as possible, and
- take place where the children feel the most comfortable.

The quality of the contact depends on how openly families communicate with each other. For more on this subject, including how much to tell children about the situation, see fact sheet #5: *The Importance of Open Communication*.

Successful face-to-face encounters between generations depends on the many players (the parents, the child, and the grandparents) and on the context. The following points cover some of the considerations.

The parents:

Is the parent physically available?

In some situations, grandparents do not know where the parent is living or rarely hear from the parent. If the parent is in prison, he or she may only be available during certain visiting hours.

Is the parent mentally and emotionally available?

Parents who are depressed may not interact or communicate with the child the way they could if they were emotionally healthy. Some parents show up to visit the child and are high or using drugs. This situation is not good for the child and the visit should be stopped.

Is the parent predictable?

Even when visitations are scheduled, the parent may not show up when they say they will. Some parents are more responsible than others and will call if plans have changed; other parents will not. Children usually keep hoping that their parent will show up for the visit. Grandparents can help the children understand that the parent may not come.

The grandparent:**How does the grandparent feel about parent-child contact?**

Many grandparents feel protective of the grandchild they are raising. They may remember a past history of abuse against the child, the parent's drug habits, or other harmful behaviors. Grandparents may turn down visits simply because they are afraid for their grandchild. Other times, the grandparent and the parents may not get along, making parent-child contact difficult. Grandparents may believe the child will be upset by the return of the parent or that the parents cause too much confusion in the child's life.

Can the grandparent arrange visits or transport the child?

If the parent does not live near the grandparent, travel can make visiting difficult. Often prisons are not located near public transportation. If a grandparent does not drive or does not own a car, visits may be hard to arrange. Many grandparents raising grandchildren also work outside the home. They may not have the time or energy to plan or sit in on visits between parent and child.

What are the alternatives?

Often grandparents are placed in the middle of these situations. Sometimes other relatives or a caseworker can help. At other times, parents and children may need to use other ways to keep in touch.

The grandchild:**How does the child feel about contact with the parents?**

Children have different feelings about seeing their parents. Infants may not know the parent if there has been no contact for a long time. Sometimes children are very excited to see their parents and feel good about the visits. In other cases, a child may not want to see the parent at all. Grandparents need to think carefully about the reasons for a child's feelings and what is best for the child.

**What meeting times and locations are best for an individual child?
How often is best?**

When deciding meeting times, locations, and frequency, many factors, including the child's relationship with the parent, the child's age, the child's reaction to previous contact, must be considered. For an infant, one visit every two months is not frequent enough to maintain a relationship.

The context:**Has there been a legal decision about contact?**

One or both parents may not be able to see the child for legal reasons. In other cases, there may be a court order that the child should see the parent.

How do institutional rules affect parent-child contact?

If the parent is in a drug treatment program or in jail or prison, children may or may not be able to visit. Some programs can support parent-child contact; others can't.

Alternatives to visits

If face-to-face contact is not possible, there are other ways of helping children stay in touch with parents in positive ways. Depending on the child's age and developmental level and on the family's circumstances, a child can rely on:

- Phone calls
- Letters
- Cards
- Drawing pictures
- Photographs or videos
- E-mails
- Taping the parent reading a favorite picture book

Helping children make positive transitions

Children living with their grandparents may face a lot of changes. Some changes are harder, such as when they must move from one home to another. Other changes are easier, but are still important to the child, such as returning from a visit with the parent. Having a routine and knowing what to expect are very important for a young child. Any change can be difficult for a child, and sometimes children react negatively before, during, or after a visit. While many things can cause negative behaviors, the changes involved in making a transition are often a reason.



Parents and grandparents need to work together for the child. The following list contains suggestions for helping children make positive transitions:¹

- Try to keep the child's life as consistent as possible. Maintain similar routines, such as bedtime routines, nap schedules, mealtime and bathing routines.
- Feed them the same foods.
- Have children wear similar clothing.
- Use comforting, familiar things that can be carried from one place to another, such as teddy bears, blankets, toys, or special photos.
- Use the same language, nicknames, and familiar words.
- Play similar games.
- Help the children keep their relationships with their brothers and sisters. Siblings provide an important sense of stability and support for any child. Brothers and sisters can talk about their troubles and relate to each other.
- Help the children maintain friendships.
- Make plans with the children so they have a sense that things will be okay. Take a trip or visit a friend. Explore things the children are interested in. Let them know they have some control over their future, no matter what happens to their mom or dad.

- Create a "lifebook" for the child. Making a lifebook helps the child remember what he or she has done. The book could contain:
 - Pictures of loved ones (parents, siblings, grandparents, pets)
 - Brief stories about what the child said and did
 - Mementos of past and present events
 - Record of visits with parents
 - Record of special family outings

Good practices for parent-child contact

Children benefit most when contact is positive, predictable, and consistent.

If possible, it is good to make the visits a part of the child's routines. It is best if visits are planned ahead of time and if each person follows through with his or her promises about visiting. It helps to be clear with the parents about what you expect for visits.

To make each visit a good one for the child, communication needs to be open, honest, and clear. When plans need to be changed, children need to be told why, in a way they can understand. Children may still be upset by the change, even when they understand the reasons.

Whether or not a visit occurs, remember to give your grandchild the chance to express how he or she feels. If the parent does not show up as planned, or the visit does not go well, don't say hurtful things about the parent. Criticizing the parent does not help the child. If you need to vent, talk with a supportive adult when the child isn't around or can't overhear you.

References

- ¹ Clyman, R.B., B.J. Harden, and C. Little. Assessment, Intervention, and Research with Infants in Out-of-Home Placement. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 23:435-453, 2002.



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This fact sheet is part of a series. To obtain the rest of the set, visit the University of Wisconsin-Extension grandparenting web site at www.uwex.edu/relationships/. For more information about this series, contact Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension or Julie Poehlmann, University of Wisconsin-Madison.