POLICY STATEMENT
The Department has a responsibility to provide stable and secure environments for children in care that meet their social, emotional, cultural, psychological and developmental needs. In meeting this responsibility, the Department recognises that all children in care should have access to information about their parents', relatives and others who are significant to them and be given opportunities to maintain contact with them, to the extent that it is in their best interests.

For a child placed in out-of-home care, maintenance of the relationship with their parent/s is important. When there are plans for reunification, it is critical. Quality contact can increase the likelihood of successful reunification, reduce time in out-of-home care, promote healthy attachment, and reduce the negative effects of separation of the child from their family.

It is also important that children, and particularly infants, are provided the opportunity to settle into a stable and predictable environment with a carer who is highly attuned to their needs in order to repair the negative effects of disrupted relationships already experienced.

The Department is committed to purposeful contact that is focused on quality, rather than high-frequency contact which can prevent a child establishing important routines, stability and attachments. Quality contact for children means reducing the number of strangers involved, supporting parents during visits, providing suitable visiting environments and reducing the child’s travel time.

PURPOSE OF THE POLICY
This policy outlines the Department’s position in relation to promoting contact between children in care and their family and seeks to guide staff in the planning and implementation of contact arrangements.

BACKGROUND
When children and young people are unable to live with their family, efforts to promote the maintenance of significant relationships with people who are important to them are essential to maintaining their culture, identity, safety and belonging.

The term ‘contact’ refers to all links between a child in out-of-home care and their parents, relatives and any other people who are significant in the child’s life regardless of the form and frequency of those links. For children who do not have regular contact with their parents, the role of extended family in providing a sense of culture, identity and connectedness is critical.

Contact is an essential aspect of care planning and is a significant consideration when case planning for a child’s permanency.

Permanency planning should not be confused with ‘permanent care’ or ‘permanent out-of-home placement’. It is intended to place an emphasis on meeting the child’s need for stability, permanency and continuity of relationships – either through reunification or through stable, long-term, out-of-home care.
LEGISLATIVE MANDATE AND PRINCIPLES
The Act enshrines care planning in legislation and, within this, the importance of developing cohesive plans for how children will maintain relationships with significant people in their lives and a connection to their culture and identity.

The Department is guided by section 7 of the Act, which states the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration when performing a function or exercising any powers under the Act. Section 8 of the Act lists the matters which must be taken into account when determining what is in the child's best interests and section 10 includes the principle of child participation.

Under section 9 of the Act the following principle is relevant when considering contact:

- the principle that if a child is removed from the child's family, then so far as is consistent with the child's best interests, the child should be given encouragement and support in maintaining contact with the child's parents, siblings and other relatives and with any other people who are significant in the child's life.

Under section 39 of the Act, the CEO must prepare and implement a provisional care plan for a child within 7 working days of the child being taken into provisional protection and care. The provisional care plan must set out the placement arrangements for the child and the contact arrangements with the child's parent/s, relative/s and any other person who is significant in the child's life.

Section 89 of the Act requires the CEO to prepare and implement a care plan for the child as soon as practicable after a child first comes into the CEO's care. This plan must include decisions about contact arrangements with the child's parent/s, relative/s and any other person who is significant in the child's life.

TYPES OF CONTACT
Contact can be maintained in a variety of ways. Face-to-face meetings will generally be the most common way of maintaining these relationships. However, telephone conversations, email messages, exchanging letters, gifts or photographs are also ways in which a connection to a child's family can be facilitated. These types of contact can be used as the sole means of facilitating contact or in addition to face-to-face contact, depending on the situation and presenting issues.

Where a child is likely to return home, face-to-face contact is generally more appropriate.

In situations where face-to-face contact is not considered to be in the child's best interests, other methods of contact will be considered as a means of keeping children connected with their family and helping them to maintain or develop a sense of identity.

Contact arrangements need to be flexible to meet the ongoing needs of the child or young person as they develop and circumstances change.

PLANNING FOR CONTACT
The Department considers many variables when developing contact arrangements for children in care including the views of the child, the child's parents, relatives, carers and with any other people who are significant in the child's life. Other considerations
include, but are not limited to, the age and routines of the child, the strength of the child’s relationships prior to entering care, the reasons for which the child was taken into care and the goal of the case plan (for example assessment, reunification or long-term out-of-home care).

Contact arrangements should be made in the context of the existing protection order and must distinguish clearly between contact aimed at reunification with parent/s, and contact that supports the child’s significant relationships when there is a long-term protection order in place.

Unless there are concerns about safety, significant variation in contact arrangements should not be made as a result of the Department making a permanency planning decision, particularly when it relates to a shift in focus from reunification to long-term out-of-home care. Instead, the Department will first need to apply to the Children’s Court for a replacement order to be made for the child.

The Department is committed to contact that is purposeful, planned, safe and supports the child’s sense of connection to their parent/s, relative/s and any other people who are significant in the child’s life. Well planned contact is achieved when an open dialogue is established between the child, the child’s family, the child’s carer/s and the Department so that the needs of the child remain the focus of the contact.

Contact arrangements are recorded in the child’s care plan or provisional care plan and linked with the overall case plan. Details will include who should have contact with the child, the type of contact that should occur, how often contact should occur, and whether or not visits need to be supervised. In some situations, the contact between a child and their family will need to be supervised by the child’s carer, a relative, or a department worker.

The Department will consider how sibling relationships can be maintained and enhanced through contact in situations where siblings are not all living together. These arrangements may require additional contact being facilitated separate to other contact arrangements for the child.

For Aboriginal children, contact arrangements should be developed in consultation with an Aboriginal Practice Leader or senior Aboriginal staff member and take into account the child’s need to remain connected to their culture and identity.

When making contact arrangements for children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds, consideration must be given to the specific cultural needs of the child and family.

REVIEWING CONTACT ARRANGEMENTS
A child’s contact arrangements should be reviewed regularly to try to ensure that the arrangements continue to meet the child’s needs. The mechanism for reviewing contact arrangements is ongoing case planning.

Regular case planning meetings help to reduce delays in achieving permanency for children. Therefore, the Department’s policy and practice guidelines state that formal review of the case plan should occur at a minimum, once every 6 months and should occur more frequently for children under 2 years of age.
Ideally, contact arrangements should be reviewed every 3 months and, in particularly contentious cases, after each contact visit.

Case planning decisions regarding contact arrangements, including suspension or cessation of contact, may require modification of the child's provisional care plan or care plan. In these instances, copies of the modified plan must be provided to all relevant parties. All parties must be advised of their right to have a contact decision referred for reconsideration.

**SUSPENSION OR CESSATION OF CONTACT**
There may be situations when it is not in the child's best interests to continue to have contact with particular individuals. In all cases, the Department will give consideration to ways of overcoming the difficulties identified before suspending or ceasing contact.

Other than in emergency situations where a child's safety and wellbeing may be compromised by contact, a meeting must be convened at the earliest opportunity and child protection workers must provide clear information to relevant parties about the reasons why contact has been suspended or ceased.

**PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN**
A guiding principle of the Act is that children in care are able to participate in the decision-making processes that impact on their lives.

Children often want and need to know what is happening in the lives of their family and the Department is committed to seeking children's views about contact. Where a child's views cannot be met, the reasons for this will be carefully explained to them and recorded in the child's care plan.

Children in the CEO's care are entitled to access advice, support and advocacy services from the Department's Advocate for Children in Care, in relation to contact and any other aspects of their care. All children in care should also be provided with a copy of the *Charter of Rights* to assist them to understand their rights and responsibilities. Young people will be advised of the CREATE Foundation, a non-government organisation which advocates for the rights of young people in care.

**SUPPORT TO PARENTS**
The Department tries to ensure that parents have a clear understanding of what is expected of them with regard to contact and that any concerns are raised and resolved at an early stage.

Where parents are prepared for a range of possible responses from their children and are helped to respond in a calm, clear and sensitive manner to any distressed or difficult behaviours, the contact experience can improve and so may the relationship between the child and the parent.

Workers need to recognise that for some parents, contact can be a challenging experience and a reminder that their children are not in their care. The Department seeks to work with parents to support and encourage positive contact with their child(ren).

The Department promotes the *Family Inclusion Network of Western Australia* to families as a means of support and information.
SUPPORT TO CARERS

In keeping with the principles of the Foster Care Partnership, the Department is committed to providing training and support to carers to assist them to understand the importance of contact, and to give them strategies to manage the challenges that contact can pose for carers.

At times, contact can be difficult for foster carers, particularly managing the behaviour and sometimes distress of the child before or after contact. Carers are encouraged to speak to their case manager if they are concerned about how contact is progressing or if they are having difficulties managing contact arrangements. It is the Department’s role to help carers understand the different reactions from children and provide them with strategies for managing a child’s behaviours as a result of contact.

Carers have a pivotal role in supporting contact between children and their families and can be an invaluable part of contact by providing support to parents and modelling positive parenting skills. This is particularly important when siblings are not all living together.

Insofar as it is assessed as being in the best interests of the child, contact with previous carers and their families should be considered when planning for a child’s reunification with parents or when a child’s placement changes. This acknowledges any significant relationships the child may have formed in care.

RELATED POLICIES AND DOCUMENTS

- Permanency Planning in Western Australia Background Paper
- Permanency Planning Policy 2012
- Reunification Policy 2012
- Care Planning Policy 2012
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles
- Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care

GUIDELINES

The Casework Practice Manual provides guidelines based on this policy.

EFFECTIVE DATE
July 1, 2012

REVIEW DATE
July 1, 2014

OWNER
Executive Director, Policy and Learning

---

1 The term parent refers to a person, other than the CEO, who at law has responsibility for the day-to-day and long-term care, welfare and development of the child.

2 The term relative refers to a child’s: grandparent, other ancestor, step-parent, sibling, uncle or aunt, cousin, spouse or de facto partner. In the case of an Aboriginal child, a person regarded under the customary law or tradition of the child’s community may also be considered a relative.

3 Others who are significant in the child’s life refers to a person(s) who has a positive relationship with the child or young person as identified by the child or young person, having regard to the child’s age and level of understanding, and/or a person considered by the CEO to have a direct and significant interest in the wellbeing of the child.