

# Taking the journey toward a trauma-informed approach to Family Time and Staying in Touch\*

## Key messages for moving toward trauma-informed practice

**Stable and therapeutic relationships** are the starting point for trauma healing. Family Time or Staying in Touch meet-ups can offer children and families a chance to heal and enjoy healthy relationships when they get the support they need.

**Help children regain a sense of control** by allowing them to make appropriate choices about Family Time or Staying in Touch meet-ups such as when and how it happens, who drives them and what music plays in the car, whether they talk and what about.

Practices that promote safety for Family and Staying in Touch Time

**Family Time or Staying in Touch plans should be as unique and dynamic as the child.** Take into account their interests, culture, age and developmental stage (which may not match expectations for their chronological age).

**Foster collaboration** with adults from both families by bringing the focus back to their shared connection and love for the child rather than differences between them.

**Stay in touch with families between visits.** A check-in phone call before Family Time or Staying in Touch meet-ups can show you care, and debriefing after can help families reflect on what went well and plan for next time.

**Child wellbeing is the core aim of Family Time and Staying in Touch.** Keep in mind that the purpose is to give children a chance to thrive in relationships, not to schedule an obligatory event.

**Give adults the tools to co-regulate with the child.** Carers and adopters can model a calm state and help children regain a safe connection to their body using play and body-based activities during Family Time and Staying in Touch meet-ups or communications.

**Physical spaces affect emotional safety.** Create inviting spaces for safe relationships to flourish wherever visits occur. How children travel to and from visits affects their experience of Family Time or Staying in Touch so minimise as far as possible any changes at short notice.

**Be aware of verbal and non-verbal communication.** When language and gestures are perceived as interrogative it mobilises fear and shame. Keep a neutral tone of voice, use non-judging words and maintain relaxed and welcoming body language to open a dialogue.

**Make time for reflection after each visit.** Ask yourself if you can do more to build on the child and family strengths and what needs to happen to improve future Family Time or Staying in Touch experiences.

**Lead difficult conversations with children's families** to adjust Family Time or Staying in Touch plans to better suit the child's needs. Model calm, respectful communication that encourages open discussion of other options.

\* Family Time is the preferred term for meetings between children and their families when they are in care, or not living with their parents.

\* Staying in Touch\* is the preferred term for post-adoption meet-ups and communications with birth family or significant others.

## Organisational approaches that progress trauma-informed practices for Family Time

**Develop a safety plan with a child to communicate and interpret how they feel.** This may include a neutral (safe) word or a symbol of feeling calm, uncertain or distressed. The Traffic Light model (red/yellow/green) can help children express safety or fear non-verbally.



**Implement trauma safety assessments and recognise that sense of safety shifts from day to day.** Key questions to ask:

- Who does the assessment?
- What information do they rely on?
- What skills do they need?
- What about non-verbal clues?



**Implement reflective supervision for all staff.** Offer a safe and regular opportunity for individuals to process responses and understand areas of resistance. Put in place strategies to address signs of secondary trauma and communicate openly about this issue.



**Respond immediately and flexibly when children indicate they feel unsafe.** Offer alternatives to visits such as:

- Would you rather talk on the phone today?
- Would you feel better if we had a video call?
- Would you like to write a letter/send a card?
- How do you know when you have had enough talking?



**Introduce trauma screening of all children.** Talk to carers and adopters to gain an understanding of a child's trauma patterns and then plan Family Time or Staying in Touch meet-ups to work within their level of tolerance. Use the Research in Practice Contact Planning Tool ([https://contact.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/RIP\\_Frontline\\_Tool\\_ContactMakingGoodDecisions\\_web.pdf](https://contact.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/RIP_Frontline_Tool_ContactMakingGoodDecisions_web.pdf))



**Empower families as experts.** Seek creative and safe ways for families to give feedback on organisational practices and to be involved in leading organisational change. For example, create a 'Family Time / Staying in Touch champions within your organisation, maybe a Maintaining Significant Relationships Advisory Group.

Here are some body-based activities that can be used to regulate emotional states. Suitable for children of all ages.

- Blow bubbles.
- Roll/unroll body along the floor.
- Hold yoga postures e.g. child or cat pose.
- Balance on an imaginary tightrope on the floor using a length of string.
- Play feather tennis e.g. blow a feather across a table and keep score.
- Dancing, Jumping Jacks or balloon bouncing.
- Practice drumming with an upturned bucket.
- Play a recorded guided meditation.
- Mirror each other's dance moves or facial expressions.
- Play dressing-up.
- Sand play, or digging in the garden.
- Making hand and foot prints.

