

Family time in early permanence: Practice Guide

What is early permanence?

Early permanence (EP) is an umbrella term which covers fostering for adoption (FfA) and concurrency. It involves placing a child with a carer who is both approved as a foster carer and prospective adopter who could go on to adopt the child if the permanence plan becomes adoption and a placement order is made. The aim of early permanence is to reduce disruption and moves for young children, whilst giving them the opportunity to live with their potential permanent carer as early on in their lives as possible.

As with any child in foster care, in early permanence the child will usually see their birth family via supervised family time (contact) sessions, usually up to three times per week. The **National Practice Standards for Early Permanence** highlight the importance of 'Practitioners, managers and leaders actively enabling the child to maintain significant relationships throughout the care journey and into the future' (Adoption England, 2023, p.15). In early permanence, there is usually an expectation that parents and carers will meet at handovers to offer continuity and consistency for the child. Family time is an aspect of early permanence that has many benefits but can be challenging for parents, carers and the child alike.

How infants experience family time

- > Children who are placed with early permanence carers are usually under the age of two and there are specific considerations that must be made when planning and supporting family time for this age of child.
- > The first year of life is a crucial period for development, particularly in terms of building an attachment with a primary caregiver.
- > Infants are establishing routines around sleeping, feeding and playing. They benefit from consistent, attuned and sensitive care from primary caregivers in a regular environment.
- > Some young children have a positive experience of family time where it becomes part of their routine, their parent/s are interested and responsive and they can form multiple attachments (or at least have a positive connection) with their carer/s and birth family members.
- > For some infants, family time can cause disruption, and they may present as distressed or unsettled or may withdraw or shut down.
- > Children may feel confused or unsettled if they do not receive attuned care from their parents during family time.
- > The practical aspects of family time can be difficult for some young children, such as regular car journeys and disruption to usual feeding and sleeping routines.
- > Family time may affect infants being able to build attachment relationships with primary caregivers due to frequent disruptions and separations (Kenrick, 2010; Humphreys & Kiraly 2011).
- > Practitioners and carers report that it can sometimes feel as though family time has not been planned with the child's needs at the fore, particularly when the child presents as distressed and where it takes a long time for adjustments to plans to be made.
- > Having a different family time supervisor at each session can also make contact more challenging for children as they are frequently met with an unfamiliar face, potentially causing additional upset.
- > Some of the more difficult aspects of family time may be mitigated through receiving a high level of good quality care from carers who are emotionally invested in the child, as early permanence carers usually are (Kenrick, 2010).
- > Any contact plans must consider the age of the child and related developmental needs, what the quality of family time is like and how stressful the experience is for the child (Schofield & Simmonds, 2011).

How family time in early permanence is different to family time/contact in other types of foster care and adoption

- > For parents and carers, early permanence does not feel like foster care or adoption. There is a great deal of uncertainty and heightened emotions for both – carers do not feel like ‘normal’ foster carers and parents can feel even more vulnerable in their position due to knowing the carers may go on to adopt their child.
- > Parents and carers may experience ‘disenfranchised parenting’ (Copson, 2024) where both feel like the child’s parents, but neither are able to fully claim to be a parent.
- > These complex parental identities experienced in early permanence are not always fully acknowledged or understood by practitioners.
- > The challenges that parents and carers can experience in relation to their parental identity in early permanence can cause friction when they meet at family time and when they are trying to relate to one another.
- > Relationships between parents and carers in early permanence need considerable support and scaffolding by practitioners, who may be key to whether these relationships are successful or not.

The purpose of family time in early permanence: who and what is it for?

- > As with family time in other placement types, early permanence family time is an opportunity for the child to maintain a connection to their birth family and for parents to spend time with their child. It can also be used to contribute towards an assessment of parenting capacity.
- > In early permanence, there is a high likelihood that the child will be adopted. Knowing this, it is important to consider how family time can be used to record/memorialise the time children and parents spend together and gather information to build a meaningful life story for the child to look back on in the future.
- > Other key purposes include practitioners being able to offer practical support to parents with their parenting skills and emotional support around their general well-being. Family time also allows for positive relationships to be built between parents and early permanence carers.
- > The purpose(s) of family time are not always openly discussed or agreed upon, so parents, carers and practitioners may have different ideas and expectations as to what will happen during sessions and what the aim of family time is overall which can cause confusion and anxiety.
- > Parents can also find family time very difficult, struggling to know what is expected of them and not always knowing their child’s routine or preferences. Parents report that family time can feel intrusive and uncomfortable.
- > Parents want to enjoy the time they have with their child and cherish opportunities to make memories such as doing specific care tasks or activities, taking photos and videos and making hand/footprints. This can also help parents come to terms with potential adoption.

The role of the family time supervisor

- > The family time supervisor is key to ensuring that sessions are enjoyable and helpful for parents, carers and infants. It is a complex and multi-faceted role which is often misunderstood and approached in different ways by individual workers and agencies.
- > Family time supervisors do not always understand what early permanence is and how it is different to mainstream fostering. This can cause difficulties for parents and carers, particularly when the emotional aspect of this type of placement is not acknowledged.
- > Some supervisors take a more 'hands on' approach, offering a lot of interaction and 'tips' to parents regarding the care of and responses to their child during and after sessions. Others focus more on observing parents and taking a back seat. These differing approaches can lead to a disparity in support for parents which can impact on the child's experience.
- > To ensure continuity and consistency for parents, carers and the child, family time should ideally be supervised by the same person for each session (or a maximum of two alternating supervisors). This provides a familiar and safe person for the child who can offer reassurance in the absence of their carer (which is also reassuring for carers), with parents also benefitting from consistent feedback from someone who they can build a relationship with.
- > The family time supervisor's role should be agreed prior to sessions commencing and made clear to parents and carers. Initial planning meetings and regular review meetings can ensure that the family time supervisor is aware of what is required of them during sessions, and in turn what parents should expect.

Evolving relationships between parents and carers: a foundation for the future

- > Family time in early permanence presents a unique opportunity for establishing a positive relationship between parents and the child's potential adopters early on, and these relationships can be built upon for future keeping in touch arrangements if the child goes on to be adopted.
- > Wherever possible, parents and carers should be allowed and encouraged to meet regularly and practitioners should consider the actual risks present, being careful not to be too risk averse.
- > There are times when parents and carers' relationships with each other may be fractious and difficult, particularly when they struggle to understand the others' position and views.
- > Difficulties can often arise when parents do not attend family time regularly. Carers can interpret this as the parents being 'lazy' or not 'bothering' which can feel frustrating and disappointing. For parents who know their child is likely to be adopted, it can feel too painful to keep seeing their child. Where carers and parents misunderstand each other, this can impact the relationship.
- > When parents have the chance to get to know more about who is caring for their child, this can be reassuring for them and reduce their anxiety.
- > Parents appreciate it when carers see them as individuals, not just the child's parents, treat them with respect and take an interest in getting to know them.
- > These unique relationships require a lot of emotional support and scaffolding from children's social workers, adoption/fostering social workers and family time supervisors.

Planning and supporting family time in early permanence: Suggestions for practice

Model of good practice



For further suggestions for practice, see 'A good practice guide for managing family time' from The Concurrent Planning Service on the [Adoption England website](#).

We are grateful for the help of Ruth Copson in preparing this briefing. These briefing notes are based on the evidence and insights from PhD research from the Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia – Managing family time in placements (Copson, 2024, unpublished doctoral thesis).

References

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