



## Exercise: Listening to very young children in contact

### Research messages

Contact plans need to be made and reviewed on an individual basis, taking into account this particular child's experiences of contact with these parents in this situation. Understanding children's feelings involves careful observation of their response before, during and after contact. Children are not always able to express their wishes verbally; non-verbal communication is very important.

Young children generally benefit from the presence of trusted adults during direct contact. When contact is difficult for children, professional support can help. This includes thinking about:

- when, where and how often the child has contact
- who supports them and the birth family
- what help birth parents might need in understanding and responding to the child
- how to ensure that everybody understands what is expected of them during visits.

All contact plans need to be provisional and regularly reviewed along with the support available.

**This exercise is suitable for:** individual learning; use during assessment and training of adoptive parents and in training for contact supervisors, social workers, foster carers, kinship carers and adopters.

**Read** the case study for Lacie and Carla. It relates to children who are at this time having direct contact with the birth parents. **Consider** the following questions:

- How do you think each child feels about contact with each parent? How do they communicate this? How would you convey this in a report for the court?
- What else do you need to know to make sense of what you see during this contact?
- What do you think their mother feels? Their father?
- How could the contact supervisor or social worker help to improve this contact for these children in the short term?
- How would each child's non-verbal communication inform your thinking about future contact if these children are placed for adoption?



## Trainer's notes

Very young children may react to seeing parents after a separation in a number of ways, including greeting them with joy, clinging, responding angrily or ignoring them. Over time, this behaviour often settles as the child becomes familiar with the routine of contact and more able to enjoy time with a parent. Lacie and Carla have been having contact for many months, but continue to show distress. Lacie seems to be resisting contact by hiding her shoes and withdrawing emotionally during visits. The effort of managing her feelings seems to exhaust her. Carla's behaviour is superficially more positive, but raises questions about whether she has learnt to please her father as a result of experiences of frightening behaviour from him or possible sexual abuse. It is important to observe these children before, during and after contact in order to make sense of their behaviour and to see them in other settings. Their current responses need to be put in the context of their experiences before removal.

It is also important to think about the overall level of contact, the venue, the time of day and the role of the supervisor in supporting the birth parents. It would be helpful to experiment with reducing the level of contact and working with the parents to improve their responses to the children before making a final decision about post adoption contact, but the emotional impact of these visits on both girls suggests caution is needed about direct contact in the long term.

This case study can be compared with the one relating to the girls' younger brother, Mikey, who has a different father and was removed at birth.