



Exercise: understanding the emotional context of contact

Research messages: contact is for children but is enacted by adults in the context of heightened emotions. There are no social norms for contact visits and birth relatives often feel awkward and uncertain. Help in understanding their role during visits is especially useful. If social workers and contact supervisors are able to empathise with the adults involved and provide some emotional support, visits are likely to go better for children. Professional support during contact can help to build and improve relationships.

This exercise is suitable for: individual learning; discussions in team meetings, training for social workers, contact supervisors, foster carers, kinship carers and adopters

Read the Mikey Maddox case study. Consider the following questions.

- How might Drew feel about coming to contact?
- How might Leanne feel?
- How might Mikey's foster carers feel?
- How might Mikey feel?

Thinking about the information provided

- How does this help or hinder?
- How could it be improved?
- What might a contact agreement say that could help everyone feel more comfortable?

Thinking about support

- What support might the parents and foster carers need ?

Thinking about long term plans

- To what extent do the current contact arrangements provide a useful basis for making long term contact plans?
- If Mikey is not returned to the care of either of his parents, what work might you want to do to support contact before you draw up a contact plan?



Notes for trainers

The aim of this exercise is to highlight the strong feelings of being judged, loss, helplessness and anxiety that contact can arouse for all of the adults, particularly when relationships between them are poor. It also highlights the ways in which written information can be punitive or supportive. Mikey is having a high level of contact and reducing this might help to improve the quality of contact. A welcoming venue and consistent supervisors will benefit everybody. Providing emotional support to both parents before, during and after visits might also help. Leanne might need a chance to talk about how she feels about Mikey growing up and wanting to play independently more. Positive feedback for Drew and the opportunity for him to get more involved in practical care (such as a shared mealtime) could build his confidence and inform assessment. An opportunity for birth relatives and foster carers to chat at the beginning or end of contact could provide reassurance for everybody.