

Coming for Child Contact at our Family Connections Centres

Preparing for contact

Children's Rights come first

Children's Rights come first at Family Journeys.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is fully incorporated into Scots Law.

Children and young people whose parents don't live together should stay in contact with both parents unless this would harm the child (Article 9).

Family Connections Centres work hard to ensure children and young people stay in touch with the parent they don't live with safely, and in a way that suits the child's needs and interests.

We will also help children and young people to stay in touch with step-parents, and their wider family (grandparents, aunts and uncles), where children and their families want this.

Children's best interests are at the centre of all decisions (Article 2).

If contact has been ordered by a Family Court, then the sheriff has decided contact with the non-resident parent is in the child's best interests. We all know sometimes adults have to make decisions children don't like, because it's good for them (like doing subjects we don't like at school, or getting a bad tooth taken out). But the sheriff will also take into account information provided by a Child Welfare Reporter.

Children have a right to have their views listened to and taken into account when decisions are made that affect them (Article 12).

During preparation for contact and the contact sessions, Family Journeys will help children to explore their feelings about contact with their non-resident parent. We work hard to give children and young people the "me and space to make up their own minds.

We also listen to them to help us plan activities and play they like, and how they want to spend their "me with the other parent.

For young children, their views can be expressed in their play, behaviour and through pictures and games.

When we report to the court or Child Welfare reporter, we will pass on any information children want us to, so that decisions about their best interests take account of their views.

Children are entitled to confidentiality.

Talking to children and young people about contact with their other parent

Preparation for coming to contact is important for children and young people

They can detect when the adults around them are anxious or upset - this upsets them too, they want to know the people they love feel okay.

Family Journeys wants you to feel okay - we understand some parents feel reluctant and worried. We want to support you to feel safe - our staff will help you to make a safety plan, and help you to talk to children, to explain the decisions that have been made.

Some general tips are:

- Be clear about what will be happening - tell your child how often they'll come to the Family Connections Centre, for how long, and that they are getting the chance to be with their other parent with staff in the centre ensuring they are safe and have toys and activities for them.
- Tell children where you will be and what you'll be doing whilst they are there - you may choose to use the time to see a friend or get things done, sometimes children like to know you are not lonely while they are busy. You can also use our parents' room to wait if you (or the children) prefer - this is safe and separate from the children's areas.
- Be as positive as you can be about the contact. Children and young people are badly affected by feeling their loyalties are divided or that they are letting you down if they enjoy the Family Connections sessions.
- Allow Family Journeys staff to introduce the child's other family, through photos, letters and information, before the first contact session, in a "social story."
- Do your best to stay calm and positive. Our YouTube podcasts on breathing and calming techniques are helpful – find these on our website.
- Respect children's right to make up their own mind about their other parent.

Ground Rules

All families are different, so we make agreements between both parents in each family, but we cover common areas in these agreements.

You don't have to meet each other to make these agreements, Family Journeys staff will negotiate between you both. These are the areas we cover to agree "ground rules" for contact to be safe and caring for both parents, and for children:

1. Feeling safe is a priority

If you want a safety plan, this will be designed to meet your need to feel safe. Staff will know this in advance of your arrival and will follow it.

2. Gifts are good – but the relationship is more important

We will ask parents to agree what kinds of gifts, if any, can be given to children - we discourage giving gifts every week, and we encourage gifts to be useful and helpful to family life and based on the children's needs.

3. Special occasions and holidays

We are flexible and there will be times when contact is postponed for other things. However, we prefer booking blocks of contact. For young children, breaks in preparation or contact can be disruptive. Try to plan ahead and keep us informed.

4. Play, and planning to have fun

We want children to enjoy contact and during the preparation sessions will make plans with them for activities - which may include crafts, baking and messy play - we provide aprons but clothes that withstand splashes etc are a good idea.

5. Who should come?

We make arrangements so you don't have to see or be near your ex-partner if you don't want to. You may need to bring other siblings and we will try to provide activities for them if you are waiting at the centre. You could bring a supporter (friend or relative) if you feel anxious. However, we advise not bringing new partners or new family members. Unless it is agreed in advance (e.g. part of the court order or an agreement made in our mediation service) other relatives of the non-resident parent are not allowed in the contact unless it is agreed in advance.

Other ground rules are non-negotiable and apply to all families

1. Sticking to agreements

We agree how things will work with both parents and the child, based on the court order if there is one. We will only vary this by discussing choices and making another negotiated agreement. Please don't put staff "on the spot" with requests out with the agreement - especially not making these requests in front of the children.

2. Lateness

If the resident parent is late, we do our best to allocate the full "me agreed for the contact session and will ask the resident parent to collect the child later - e.g. if the session starts at 10 for 2 hours and the child arrives at 10.15 the session will finish at 12.15. If the non-resident parent is late, the "me is not made up afterwards. Lateness is recorded in any reports we make.

3. Cancellations

We aim to complete the number of sessions agreed or court ordered. Cancellations are recorded in any reports we make. Please use our phone line and select the option for your contact centre, if you need to cancel at short notice.

4. Infection safety

We take precautions to minimise infection, for covid 19 and other infectious illnesses. This is a situation where we DO want you to cancel if anyone in the family feels unwell and has been exposed to infection.

5. What adults say to each other in front of children, and asking children to keep secrets or spread messages

We're here to listen to your worries, but we will remind both parents not to talk negatively about the other parent in front of your child, this can be very bad for children's mental health.

Please don't share information with children and ask them not to tell the other parent, and please don't ask children lots of questions about their lives that the other parent does not want you to know. After the contact, avoid asking the child what the other parent did or said.

Steps in family connections

<p>1</p>	<p>You contact us (or your solicitor or another professional may contact us).</p> <p>We take initial details. We may need to wait for your ex-partner to confirm they are willing to work with us.</p>	<p>At this stage, if you are eligible and wish to apply for legal aid, it's a good idea to do so.</p> <p>You don't have to be involved in court action to do this - advice and assistance is eligible.</p>
<p>2</p>	<p>We will contact you to make an appointment for a Choices Meeting - this is a more in-depth assessment of what you and your family needs from us.</p>	<p>This can be done by zoom or phone. It is confidential and information is not shared with your ex-partner.</p>
<p>3</p>	<p>We will ask the resident parent to bring the children to the Family Connections Centre to meet staff, see the playroom and parents' room, and plan the contact. The non-resident parent is not present during preparation.</p>	<p>This is informal and it's the start of giving your child space and time to explore their feelings about contact and how they want it to go.</p> <p>The resident parent's help to explain and support contact is important to the child's wellbeing.</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>There may be a few more preparation sessions.</p> <p>As these progress, we want the resident parent to get used to leaving the child to play with staff in the playroom - this is especially important for younger children.</p> <p>While the child is playing, adults can discuss the ground rules and agree plans.</p>	<p>We will start to have separate meetings with the non-resident parent to plan the start of the contact and finalise agreements for ground rules.</p>

<p>5</p>	<p>We agree a date and time for the contact sessions to start.</p> <p>We'll have the activities and toys ready that the child has chosen.</p>	<p>The non-resident parent may still need to be patient - if the child is nervous or unsure, it may only be appropriate for a short period of contact, or to wait calmly and observe the child playing until the child is confident to approach.</p> <p>Staff will work with the child and parent to judge how best to do this.</p>
<p>6</p>	<p>We will review how things are going 2-3 sessions before the end of the agreed block of contact.</p> <p>If things are going well, we'll offer mediation or discussion about next steps.</p> <p>It's not always necessary to go back to court to make agreements: to carry on as things are, or support more independent contact.</p>	<p>But be aware progress takes time - for things to move on, everyone has to feel comfortable that the child is happy, and communication is improving.</p>
<p>7</p>	<p>If it doesn't go well and the child is really struggling to make a relationship with the non-resident parent, we will do our best to support the child to understand and process the situation in a way that is appropriate for their age and understanding.</p> <p>We will share this information in our report to the court.</p>	<p>Good relationships between children and their parents are voluntary and based on honesty.</p> <p>Children may remember a difficult time during the end of their parents' relationship; or they may remember one or both parents being very upset after the separation.</p> <p>These are hard things to come to terms with and for many children, mixed up with love for their parents and a need to know they are loved and wanted.</p> <p>It is important that both parents, and our staff, do what we can to support the child to process all of this without pressure.</p>

Things you should know

Rights and responsibilities

Maintaining contact with both parents after separation is a child's right and their parents' responsibility. All of the adults involved have a duty to work in ways that put the child at the centre.

Confidentiality

Each individual involved is entitled to confidentiality - the parents, and the children - unless we believe that there is risk of harm. Then, we must share information.

However, we ask parents to agree that we can keep their information securely and share information with their legal representatives (if they have one) on certain aspects of their case.

The court can also ask us for information.

Reporting

When we make reports, we describe factually what we have seen and heard when children are preparing for and have contact with their parent.

We do sometimes explain why we think the child is benefiting or not benefiting from contact to help courts decide what is in their best interests.

We use our professional experience as qualified nursery teachers, teachers.

Impartiality

Being involved in a legal process sometimes encourages people to feel there are opposing "sides" in relation to contact.

We are impartial - except that we are really clear we are focused on children's best interests and want to help both parents fulfil their responsibilities to act in the child's best interests.

Complaints

You can make complaints about our services if you wish.

Address these to info@familyjourneys.scot and mark your email "CONFIDENTIAL COMPLAINT".

Our complaints process and policy are on our website.

Fees

We are a charity and our purpose is to support families after separation. We aim to be flexible and affordable - we will always talk to you about what is affordable if you are not using legal aid.

Remember, legal aid does not last for ever. Our aim is to help you progress as family towards agreements and communication that can be made safely without court and solicitor involvement.

Why is it a journey

As children grow up, they will want to know more about their background and wider heritage.

Many adults spend time and money tracing their family connections when these have been cut off earlier in their lives - they feel they need this to make sense of who they are and how they can enjoy their own relationships. Your child might feel the same when they are older.

Research shows that there is lasting damage to children's sense of identity, mental and emotional wellbeing, when they feel torn between two parents or that parents' conflict is a big part of their growing up. This lasts into adulthood and affects learning and positive development.

This is why we want to support parents to find ways to maintain family connections, recover from conflict, and strengthen the way they co-operate with each other for the benefit of their children.

It's tough at times. You may feel hurt, angry, misunderstood and that your needs are not being accounted for. You may have experienced your own trauma. We will work with you to ensure your own needs are supported.

We can also offer:

- Children's Groups
- Parents' Groups
- Courses for parents helping you support your child's mental health

Mediations and family group decision making



Get in touch

Family Journeys

519 Gorgie Road,
Edinburgh,
EH32 3AJ

Phone: 0131 322 3863

Reception lines are open;

- Tuesday 10am-3pm
- Wednesday 10am-4pm
- Friday 10am-1pm

Email: info@familyjourneys.scot

Website: familyjourneys.scot

Member of Relationships Scotland