



Top tips for kinship carers to help children to maintain relationships during the Coronavirus outbreak.



Supporting children who cannot live with their parents

These top tips were published on **24th March 2020**.

Given the rapidly changing situation during the crisis, this guide may be subject to amendment and re-issue. If we update this top tips guide, to reflect any relevant new Government or court guidance, we will always publish the latest version on our:

website: www.frg.org.uk

twitter: [@FamilyRightsGp](https://twitter.com/FamilyRightsGp)

facebook: [Family Rights Group](https://www.facebook.com/FamilyRightsGroup)

A kinship carer is also often referred to as a family and friends carer. Kinship carers include grandparents raising grandchildren and brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and other relatives or friends who are raising a child in their family or friendship network, who is unable to live with their parents. This may be due to parental death, imprisonment, mental or physical ill-health, learning disabilities, domestic abuse, substance misuse or other factors.

Introduction

Due to the Coronavirus outbreak, over the next few months, all of us will be practicing social distancing or will have to self-isolate. This will lead to significantly reduced physical interactions with people we love and care about.

Social distancing may feel particularly harsh for children who are not living with their parents. They may feel very isolated despite the efforts of their carers. They may miss or worry about their parents and other family members or friends.

Maintaining social networks is important for all children and young people, but it is often especially significant for those who cannot live with their parents and who may struggle with identity, anxiety, prior rejection and loss. Keeping in touch with people they care about, who are significant to them or they love will help provide them with reassurance during an already difficult time.

Research shows that stability and support from family and community are the most important ingredients in enabling young people to make a successful transition to adulthood

(DfE, 2014)¹

This top tips guide suggests ways that kinship carers – and local authorities and voluntary agencies – and importantly, parents and other family members and friends - can help children maintain relationships with those they care about, and who care about them, even if they can't have direct face to face visits.

Children who have experienced loss, have extra reason to need to feel connected with other loved ones. They may worry about those who do not live with them, such as their mother, father, brothers or sisters, grandparents, family or friends - especially those people they know with additional health concerns.

If relationships are not facilitated, maintained and prioritised during the next few months of this Coronavirus outbreak, children and young people may try and contact or visit people themselves in an unsafe way, that endangers their own health and safety or that of the people they love and potentially the health and wellbeing of their carers.

¹ Department for Education (2014) *Rethinking support for adolescents in or on the edge of care* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/342052/Rethinking_support_for_adolescents.pdf

Facilitating communication with parents and other family and friends can help keep children and young people safe by keeping them at home.

This is a very difficult time and we know that many kinship carers are

grappling with numerous challenges, including trying to keep everyone in their household safe. We hope that kinship carers will find this top tips guide useful and we would welcome your feedback.

About Coronavirus

Up-to-date information can be found here:

NHS website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

GOV.UK Website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>

The child's wishes and feelings

All children will be facing disruption to their lives at the moment, as a result of Coronavirus. Most will not be attending school at the moment, and older children in particular may be increasingly aware and worried about the impact that Coronavirus is having, and may have, on their lives.



You will be thinking about the child's needs. But also do encourage them to talk about their thoughts, about their wishes and feelings. One of the lessons from our Lifelong Links work with children in the care system, is that if a child feels they cannot discuss how they feel because it might distress or worry their carer or their carer may disapprove, they will either bottle it up and get anxious or secretly explore and contact their parents, relatives and friends and even try and visit them. So do encourage them to tell you their feelings and thoughts. There are some very helpful free resources available about how to discuss the Coronavirus in an age appropriate way, including from the BBC and Save the Children <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/how-you-can-help/emergencies/coronavirus-uk-outbreak-facts#coronavirus>

The legal context for children in kinship care

Children who live with kinship carers may do so under various legal orders or arrangements. In considering managing contact, it is first helpful to consider the legal and practical considerations that need to be kept in mind, depending on each type of legal order or arrangement.

Special guardianship orders:

- When a special guardianship order is made, the special guardian is granted parental responsibility for the child. Parents retain their parental responsibility, however the special guardian has 'exclusive' parental responsibility, which means that they have the final say when it comes to day to day decision making for the child – for example in relation to contact arrangements.



- Before making a special guardianship order, the court must also consider whether, alongside the special guardianship order, it should also make a child arrangements 'spend time with' order to set out the time that children will spend with their parents or other family members.

Child arrangements orders (saying that the child lives with the kinship carer) or a residence order:

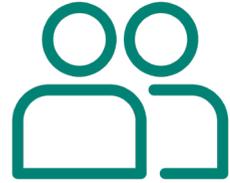
- If a 'lives with' child arrangements order is made (or the kinship carer has a residence order), then the kinship carer is granted parental responsibility, which is shared equally with the parents and others with parental responsibility.



- A child who is living with a kinship carer under a child arrangements order may also have a 'spend time with' child arrangements order, to provide clarity as to when they will have contact with their parents or other family members.

Family and friends foster carers:

- If children's services have 'placed' a child with a relative, friend or other 'connected person', then that person should be assessed and recognised as a family and friends foster carer. The child may be under a care order (interim or final order), in which case the local authority has parental responsibility and final decision making authority in relation to contact. If the child is voluntarily accommodated, then in the main it will be only the parents who have parental responsibility and arrangements about contact should be organised by the local authority with the parents. The family and friends foster carer does not have parental responsibility for the child.



Informal or private arrangements:

- Some kinship carers take on the care of a family member or friend's child, without the prior involvement of children's services or the court. In a situation such as this, even when a kinship carer has been caring for the child for some time, they do not have parental responsibility for the child, this rests only with the parents and any other person with parental responsibility.



- **Direct contact** refers to the child meeting and spending time with a parent, relative or friends in person.
- **Indirect contact** refers to the child communicating with a parent, relative or friend in other ways than physically being together, this could be online, or via letter or email.

Guidance for kinship carers in relation to contact with parents



Special guardianship orders:

Given the measures announced by the Prime Minister about households staying at home, you are likely to pause arrangements for direct face to face contact between children and their parents. Even if the Prime Minister relaxes those measures in a few weeks, if you have underlying health concerns or are over 70 years old, you may have very legitimate concerns about managing direct contact during the crisis. However, it is important that special guardians keep in mind the following:

- Do the parents have a **child arrangements order or contact order** that sets out the time that they are to spend with their child? If you suspend direct contact at this time, then you may not be able to comply with the terms of the order for a while. Of course you must act in the best interests of the child and your family, to ensure their safety, but if you do, for example, stop direct contact for the time being, then we would recommend that you set this out in an email or text to the parent(s), and be proactive in organising alternative indirect contact. You may also want to copy in the social worker, if one is involved with your child or family.

This could reassure the child that they can still have a relationship with their parents at this worrying time.

If any change in arrangements is later considered by the court, then you would want to demonstrate that you did what you could in the circumstances to maintain the relationship between the child and their parent. Given the uncertain nature of this virus and its implications, it is very difficult to be able to provide reassurances to the child or parents about how long any pause in direct contact may go on for, but it is important to be able to demonstrate that during the life of this outbreak, you did what you could to maintain relationships for the child.

- Where there is no order for contact in place, these considerations are still very important. Whilst you have 'exclusive' parental responsibility, they still have a duty to consult with parents about most key decisions relating to the child, which includes decisions about contact.

- If the local authority that was involved in assessing you as a special guardian has a 'post order' or 'kinship care' team, then you may want to contact them for advice and support at this time. If the order was made more than three years ago, you should contact the local authority in which you are now living for support.

- The reality is that even if you still have some ongoing involvement or contact with a social worker, they are likely to be difficult to get hold of at this time. We suggest trying to think pragmatically about what might be a reasonable comparable contact arrangement for children in these circumstances, taking into consideration their wishes and feelings.



Kinship carers who have 'lives with' child arrangements orders or residence orders

- Even if the child lives with you, and you have an order that grants you parental responsibility, as a kinship carer with a child arrangements order you do not have 'exclusive' parental responsibility over the parents or others with parental responsibility. Therefore, you may need to come to an agreement with the parents about contact arrangements for the child. If there is a child arrangements order in place that sets out time that a child should spend with their parent, then as above, you need to consider what you can do to promote indirect contact in the circumstances and that variations are proportionate.

- The situation is a little different if a child shares their time across two homes – for example, if a kinship carer shares care with another relative or with a parent. Government guidance issued on 23 March 2020 says that a child whose parents share their care, can move between their parents' two homes. It would therefore follow that if a kinship carer and a parent share the care of a child, then they may be able to continue to share this care during the crisis. The arrangements would of course need to comply with other Government guidance - e.g. where one household needs to self-isolate, or where one member of a household has an underlying health condition, then the child should not be travelling between two homes. Where the child cannot go between homes, you need to consider how best to facilitate indirect contact and try to come up with a consensual solution if possible. If you have questions about this new Government guidance, you can call Family Rights Group's freephone telephone advice service on 0808 801 0366 to discuss. If difficulties arise, the first step should be family mediation. Mediators, along with many other professionals in the family justice system, are looking at ways of working virtually, and so it may be possible to have remote mediation sessions to consider alternative arrangements for children at this time. For more information about family mediation, please see this website: <https://www.familymediationcouncil.org.uk/>

- Ultimately, if arrangements cannot be agreed, then parents or kinship carers always have recourse to the Family Court – they could make an application to vary a child arrangements order, or apply for a new child arrangements order. However the reality at this time is that the court is also overwhelmed with the demands of setting up remote court hearings in respect of ongoing and urgent cases. We would therefore urge you to try to work with the other parent or relative to come up with a solution before considering any application to court, which could in any event take many months to resolve.



Family and friends foster carers:

For family and friends foster carers who are caring for a child who is ‘looked after’, you should refer in the first instances to the social worker for guidance around contact. However, as you are the child’s carer you might want to refer to some of the practical guidance in this note to come up with some suggested proposals that will work for you, the child and their parents or wider family. These could hopefully then be the starting point for discussions between the social worker and parents or family members.

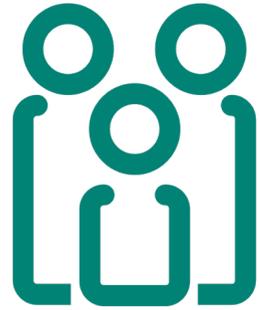


Informal or private arrangements:

As a kinship carer in this scenario, you will not have parental responsibility and so ultimately all contact arrangements need to be arranged with the parents or those with parental responsibility. If you share care with a parent, then Government guidance says that the child can move between their homes during the crisis. You must act in a way which is safest for the child, and arrangements would need to comply with other Government guidance e.g. where one household needs to self-isolate, or where one member of a household has an underlying health condition, then the child should not be travelling between two homes. If you feel you are being forced to act in a way which puts the child in an unsafe situation or where you are having to breach the law, then you can contact the police or children’s services.

Getting support including a family group conference

If the local authority has a kinship care team or 'post order' support team, then you may want to contact them for advice and support at this time. If you have a legal order for the child and the order was made more than three years ago, you should contact the local authority in which you are now living for support.



In all of the scenarios above, a family group conference could be very helpful. If you have a social worker, you can contact them or the local authority's kinship care team and consider asking them to refer you to a family group conference service. Please see this advice sheet for more information about family group conferences: https://www.frg.org.uk/images/Advice_Sheets/3-what-is-a-family-group-conference.pdf

Local authorities are starting to convene a virtual family group conference, for example via Skype or Zoom, to agree interim plans and arrangements to ensure the child can still keep in touch with their parents and other family members.

Practical guidance about indirect contact

Here are some ways in which you can help facilitate safe, meaningful communication with loved ones.

We are conscious that many kinship carers will be used to facilitating direct contact which is supervised, either by them, by a social worker or at a contact centre, and that this might be more difficult to manage when dealing with indirect contact, which can be less boundaried. We have throughout the suggestions below, aimed to highlight ways in which indirect contact can still be supervised, so it is safe.

Whilst we primarily refer in the examples below to contact with parents, the same approach applies to facilitating relationships with all who the children love or care about, especially brothers and sisters who do not live with the child, and other relatives and people who are important to the child.

Whilst some of the suggestions below may feel daunting for those less confident in using information technology, there are also suggestions about using the good, tried and tested phone or letter. You can ask your kin child to teach you (it can be part of their and your home learning experience!), there are lots of 'how to' films on YouTube or if you are part of a peer support group, then do ask them for their suggestions.

We know that some parents and other relatives may be very upset and confused at the idea that they will not see the child for a while. They may have heard contradictory advice in the media. That upset may express itself in various ways. One kinship carer said that what she found worked, was proactively contacting the parents and putting forward suggestions, in the following terms, for how they could continue to stay in touch with their child "I think it's best for child if we" or "I'm sure you'd agree ...", "I know you would always put ...'s health first" etc.

Telephone

For many, regular phone calls will be a good option. It is an easy way to communicate, but the following points should be kept in mind:



- If the parents and kinship carers have limited contact normally, for example where contact is supervised, then rather than sharing phone numbers, it might be best to use free conference call sites like [Zoom](#) or [Skype](#). This allows people to dial into a generic number with a passcode which allows multiple people to talk together, and the child may find it much more natural to have a video call – which is the closest thing to direct contact. This can be supported by the kinship carer who may remain in the room, with the call on speaker phone.
- If parents do not want the kinship carer to be in the room for the duration of the call, as this is a bit unnatural when they are used to seeing the child without the kinship carer present, then another option could be [WhatsApp](#) voice clips. Voice clips and photos could be sent by the child using the kinship carer's phone, and will enable the child to update their parent on what they have been up to, and if the kinship carer (or a social worker) thinks that an element of supervision is required, then they can listen to the voice clips before playing them to the child.
- Conversely, arrangements between kinship carers and parents may be relatively relaxed, and the kinship carer may be in quite regular telephone contact with the parents.

We would recommend agreeing ground rules with set times at a certain time of the day or and arrangements for calls (whether telephone or video calls). If for example, prior to the crisis, a parent had a two hour fortnightly visit, this might become a shorter weekly telephone or video catch up. This is important at a time when children's routines are already disrupted due to school closures. Whilst some children, for example those who are looked after, may still be

going to school, lots will also be at home at the moment and carers need to be able to establish agreed home learning schedules.

You might want to look at this BBC news article, which provides a helpful guide to making video calls using different devices:

[Step by step guide: how to video call your family](#)

Social Media

[Facebook Live](#) and [Google Hangouts](#) are online programmes that offer direct and simple ways in which people can text, talk and video call each other. Children under the age of 13 cannot have their own account on Facebook and Google Hangout (nor on YouTube). So this option is only for teenagers or needs to be organised by the kinship carer on their Facebook or Google Hangout account with them supervising.



In order to encourage group engagement or activities with other relatives or friends living elsewhere, you could set challenges, a quiz or games to encourage safe social interaction

“Closed” Social Media Groups

Sites such as [Yammer](#) allow people to join a ‘closed’ network group in which photos, messages and videos can be shared – it is like Facebook but only invited people can see your profiles and conversations. People can only join with an invite from you. No-one else from outside your network can see posts.



Letters and cards

Never underestimate the power of a letter or card, particularly at a difficult time like this. Children and family members can send letters backwards and forwards and include drawings, photos and stories to keep each other up-to-date.



As long as addresses can be safely shared, then this can be an excellent way to not only stay in touch, but offer some structured time to compose a letter and other materials for different people.

Where kinship carers' addresses are kept confidential, letters and cards may be able to be shared through the local authority, as well as being photographed or scanned and sent electronically by email.

Emails

Email is a great way to communicate and send pictures, letters and video. Specific email addresses can be set up quickly and easily for the purpose of communicating with loved ones. This is a particularly good way for older children to keep in touch.



Blogs

[Blogs](#) can be a really good way of communicating with the world. Words, pictures and videos can be posted for a public audience to see. Content would have to be safe enough to post using this method, but could make an interesting home-school project for children and young people.



There are a good number of sites that make it easy such as [Wix](#), [Wordpress](#) and [Blogs](#).

Video diaries or vlogs

Video diaries or [vlogs](#) can be made using mobile phones and laptops to share on social media through sites such as YouTube or WhatsApp. You can even make an [account private](#) so that videos can only be seen by people you send the details to. Alternatively you can record a video and send it by email as described above.



Making videos can be fun to do for older children and a more personal way in which to keep in touch. They can be filmed and edited allowing for safety.

If the person you are recording it for is deaf or hard of hearing you are able to add subtitles using [Headliner](#), a free to use website. Headliner will automatically add subtitles once you upload your video or vlog. It just requires a little editing by yourself.

Face to face

There may still be very limited situations in which face-to-face visits will go ahead. In these situations, please follow [government guidelines](#).



We do not know how long the effects of Coronavirus will impact on all of us, and arrangements for seeing each other, and we hope that this guidance is helpful in the meantime. Family Rights Group will continually update our advice as further guidance is issued by the government, and as matters develop. If you need further advice and support, please do contact our advice service on 0808 801 0366, and one of our specialist legal and practice advisers will be able to help.

We welcome your feedback. Please email any comments to:
jjohnston@frg.org.uk

Family Rights Group works with parents in England and Wales whose children are in need, at risk or are in the care system and with members of the wider family who are raising children unable to remain at home.



We champion policies and practices that keep children safe within their family and strengthen the family and community support networks of children in the care system.

Telephone Advice Line

If you are a parent, family member or friend of a child, in England or Wales, who has social workers involved in your child's life, or if you need extra support from Children's Services, and would like to speak to an adviser, please call our free and confidential helpline.

0808 801 0366

(Monday to Friday 9.30am to 3pm)



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