

Community resources

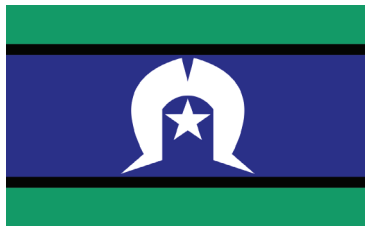
Planning for more effective access visits



Kinship
Carers
VICTORIA



PODCASTS PROGRAM



GPV/KCV acknowledges the peoples of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of our great land and offers respect to Elders, past and present.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that the Aboriginal culture existed in Australia before European settlement and consisted of many community groups. Further, we acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of this land as the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that laws and policies of the past have inflicted grief and suffering on our fellow Australians and regrets the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

GPV/KCV believes that a society that is inclusive of all is crucial to individual and community wellbeing and will behave with respect towards all irrespective of their race, religion, sexuality, gender or socio-economic background.

GPV/KCV acknowledges 13th of February as National Apology Day, the anniversary of then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, delivering the National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in 2008. GPV/KCV will take steps that promote a happier and healthier future for Indigenous Australians, particularly the children and young people.

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Key words which influence GPV/KCV approaches are: Truthfulness, Confidentiality, Inclusiveness, Integrity, Constancy, Gratitude, Commitment, Compassion

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ADAPTATION of a PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Planning for more effective access visits – from a podcast addressed to kinship carers

This podcast was recorded and produced on Djara Country, the land of the Dja Dja Wurrong people, and we extend our ongoing respect to all Kulin Nation peoples, the traditional custodians of these lands and pay respect to the elders both past and present and to the deep knowledge of the land that is embedded within the indigenous communities.

Access or contact visits happen when children in kinship care spend time with members of their biological or extended family. They (the visits) can be formal or informal, and are sometimes supervised by a professional, such as a child protection worker or agency worker, or even by the kinship carer themselves.

In the following adaptation of a podcast transcript, Adam Lyons, Managing Director of Lancaster Consulting¹, addresses some of the more common issues carers face in preparing the children in their care for access visits. He also outlines strategies for debriefing children afterwards.

Firstly, Adam talks about the types of emotions children can feel leading up to and during access visits and about how they might feel after the visits.

AL – Access visits can provoke a range of different emotions individualised to each child. Often in the lead-up to visits there might be a level of anxiety and even some fear surrounding the visit. There also might be some excitement and some curiosity about what that's like.

There is potential for some behavior changes, and regression in behavior and an increase in clinginess or need for support is often evident. During a visit, children may experience some confusion, excitement, or overstimulation due to the often-intense nature of the visits. Some children may be overwhelmed or eager to connect with their family members, whereas others may display withdrawal – and may not want to engage, or even see, their family.

Following the visits, some children may feel sad, while others might feel relieved that it is over. There might be evidence of exhaustion, contrasting with extended energy. The transition back from access visits can prove challenging for children to navigate, with this impacting their mood, engagement and their communication.

Given the range of different emotions children may experience resulting from an access visit and the behavioral changes that can occur, carers need to exhibit understanding and patience in supporting the child.

¹ Adam is a registered educational and developmental psychologist who has made positive behaviours support his philosophy of choice. Adam has spent more than 15 years across the government, non-government and private sectors and works with the team at Lancaster Consulting to deliver a range of training services for kinship and foster carers, amongst other groups.



Planning for more effective access visits

Adam outlines key components of the post-visit process and provides some valuable strategies for carers.

AL – We might need to be ‘talking through the situation’ with the children. Key components of this include providing a quiet and safe space, and exercising patience. Some children will blurt out as much information as they possibly can about the situation, whereas others will do so in their own time, space and way. It is important to provide time for reflection, reflective listening, question asking, and to create a safe environment for that child to express themselves in different ways.

Another consideration for post-visit supports is the structure of the routine; having a ritual or doing a fun activity together following the access visit can help to alleviate transition issues. This also aids in providing reassurance and comfort for the child following a tricky or difficult visit. If the visit is exceptionally difficult for a child, more focus should be paid to their wellbeing, and in some circumstances professionals such as psychologists or counsellors may need to be involved.

There are often difficult conversations after access visits, and prompting children to express their emotions can require careful navigation on the part of carers. Adam outlines some beneficial techniques to help the children to talk through their experiences and lead the conversation.

AL – Post-visit conversations can be tricky to navigate; encouraging child-lead conversation can help the child adjust. Allowing children to choose the time, the place, and the way in which they want to express themselves is important. Providing a range of different opportunities and options will cater for children’s different rates and types of responses.

Some children are better at talking when they are engaged in an activity, such as play or art. Attention on the words the child needs to share can be less intense when they are also focused on a hands-on activity. Sometimes just respecting that silence, and having some downtime allows time for the child to process the information and experience arising from the visit. Meeting that downtime with empathy through active listening, reassurance, and giving them the opportunity to expand on those answers in time is important.

Another consideration is the use of open-ended questioning. Rather than asking and firing off a series of yes-or-no questions, it is better to ask questions such as: How was the visit today? Or do you want to share something good about how the session went? or What sort of things did you do during that session? This provides the child the opportunity to share the amount and type of information with which they feel comfortable.

Beyond immediate preparation and post-visit debriefing, how can carers create a consistent environment of support and understanding for the children in their care, especially if access visits become a regular occurrence? Adam explains how routines can help create a safe environment for children to express themselves.



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AL – Every child benefits from clear routine, particularly when some experiences might be tricky or challenging for that child to navigate. Consistent activities such as wake-up time, daily activities and night-time routines act as an anchor point for that child's life. They increase the predictability for children, providing stability and clear expectations.

Another important component is promoting open support and understanding. Carers need to be flexible in their responses and able to meet the child at the level of their needs, and they need to understand that child's feelings as they fluctuate. Some days the child might be really happy and excited about access visits, on other days they may not. There is no right or wrong response. Promoting a sense of safety and security for children can provide a sense of safety for them.

Adam talks next about how carers can play a key role in creating a constructive, positive relationship between the child and their biological family throughout access visits. Sometimes there can be difficulties beyond a carer's ability, and (he) notes when professionals such as psychologists or counsellors might be needed to help.

AL – Carers play a key role in encouraging a positive view of access visits. The dynamic between biological parents, children and carers can always be a tricky thing to navigate. Carers can assist by providing a sense of openness and encourage connection by ensuring that they're promoting access visits in a positive light. The way in which access visits are talked about with children can influence a positive attitude toward the visit. This can be achieved by encouraging sharing of memories, experiences, and talking about family in a way that promotes the child to want to engage and want to interact.

When there need to be discussions around difficult elements of the visit, carers should be mindful of whether children are in earshot, as some of the topics that may need to be discussed are difficult for young children to understand. Carers need to also be mindful of the types of conversations they have and the way in which they communicate about access visits.

Sometimes access visits are supervised by a professional such as a child protection worker, a social worker, or an objective third party. Carers may have to engage with a professional pre- or post-visit. Keeping conversations positive whilst the child is around can be helpful in encouraging the connection.

Access visits don't always go as well as hoped. Carers also need to look after themselves and deal with their own expectations and emotions, especially when their relationships with their own children are fraught. It is important for carers to prepare, but also to ask for advice from professionals.

AL – As well as being challenging for children, access visits can also be emotionally confronting for carers. Carers may experience challenges around the organisation and promotion of the visits, and the impact that they may have on the child in care. One of the things that carers can do is educate themselves and prepare for this. Professionals in their lives can assist in providing support for carers' wellbeing and on the way in which they view access visits.



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Access visits can disrupt the family unit and routines that carers have put in place for the children. Understanding how routines can be reestablished and minimizing potential impacts of the access visits can require preparation and assistance from people around them.

Another thing to consider is setting realistic expectations around access visits. Carers should educate themselves, seek support, engage with other carers, and engage with other professionals to share experiences. Access visits will vary; sometimes they're okay, sometimes they're great, sometimes they're not – and that's alright.

Carers themselves can be a great resource for other carers in this space to compare notes and seek advice. Adam discusses the value of carer groups and other professional networks.

AL – Access visits are often a hot topic of conversation amongst carer groups. Sharing experiences in both informal formal kinship care networks is helpful in reducing feelings of isolation. It can also provide new carers with knowledge of some of the common challenges of access visits, and support tools available in adjusting to these new experiences. Accessing professional services and professional networks can also be helpful. There are a range of pre- and post-supports that may be available through psychologists or councilors. Understanding the role that schools and education play in providing support for both carers and children is important as they can also provide support in accessing welfare services.

Another area of support that can be accessed is the Carer KaFE network, which provides a series of professional workshops and forums around different topics, including welfare and wellbeing issues that impact carers and children. The network also provides opportunity for carers to share experiences.

Adam has some final words of advice for carers on preparing themselves and the children or young people in their care for access visits.

AL – One of the biggest take-home messages is the understanding that there can be a range of different impacts for children, and there is no one-size-fits-all strategy to approach access visits. It is important to remember to meet the children's level of needs, to be open to having conversations, and to provide a safe and nurturing space that allows children to feel comfortable and confident in sharing what they would like.

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