## Common Principles for Contact

The 6 common principles for contact were shaped through 2 workshops with the Out-Of-Home-Care sector, designed by The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI). The purpose of the first workshop was to build a shared understanding about contact across the sector, which built on the findings from qualitative research and the literature review by the kContact Research Project[[1]](#footnote-1). The purpose of the second workshop was to define a set of principles grounded in our insights from the first workshop and identify ways to put them into practice. Here we explore 6 underlying principles that have been summarised through TACSI’s work, and which the sector believes should be strongly represented in any common set of principles.

## The Principles:

1. Put purpose first
2. Plan with and fit to routine
3. Set and manage expectations
4. Show respect, build trust
5. Support children, parents, carers and workers
6. Review and improve

We see these as not only principles for caseworkers and managers, but for children, parents, carers and anyone with a decision making, planning or organisational role for contact. We’ve seen different kinds of people involved in contact and each needs to play his or her role for contact to be effective. Children, parents, carers, contact workers, caseworkers, managers and legal professionals will all need these principles to be brought alive in a way that makes sense to them in their unique role.

The principles are not set out as strict guidelines, as we know that decreased flexibility can work against good practice. Practitioners will need to align their approach to contact with the overarching principles in order to ensure that contact is continuously improved and tailored to the needs of each child or young person, and to each setting. More detail on each principles is below.

### Put purpose First

Clarity of purpose of contact was seen as the most important principle to underlie any improvements. A contact experience that is in the best interest of the child is a contact experience designed to advance to the goals set for that child in the case and care plan. To achieve these principles before, during, after and in-between contact, experiences would need to be intentionally designed to achieve the case and care plan goal.

### Plan with and fit to routine

Contact experiences that work for children involve children in the planning. This leads to contact that is seen as more normal in the eyes of the child. Caseworkers will also take on board the views of carers and parents. To work well, contact has to work for all involved. Engaging children, birth parents, and carers in the planning creates the best outcomes for contact that is perceived as normal by children and fits with the busy lives of all participants.

### Set and manage expectations

Contact in the best interest of the child is contact where everyone is clear about what’s happening, when, why and with whom. Everyone knows and understands their role. Achieving this will mean providing people with simple tools and resources that will set everyone up to play their role, a role that will help contact achieve its purpose.

### Show respect, build trust

Contact experiences that work for children are contact experiences that are an ongoing exercise in building trust and respect. This means workers modelling trust and respect, taking part in trust building exercises and consistency of workers. This also means not having supervised contact as the default position and/or never considering whether this could be changed. If contact is being supervised, all participants at a contact session need to be clear about what’s being observed.

### Support children, parents, carers and workers

Workers need to be supported to develop their practice to take on board the above principles: they need to be supported to organise contact as efficiently as possible, to understand the purpose of contact and to include children, parents and carers in contact planning. Children, parents and carers need support. They need tools and resources to understand the what, why and how of contact.

### Review and Improve

Contact experiences that work in the best interest of children are contact experiences that are continually reviewed and improved. This means building contact where review of experience is integral and feedback loops help improve the quality of contact in the best interests of the children.

1. Bullen, T., Taplin, S., Kertesz, M., Humphreys, C., & McArthur, M. (2015)  *Literature review on supervised contact between children in out-of-home care and their parents*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)