



## Northern Ireland Network Of Child Contact Centres



*Information Leaflet for  
Parents and Carers*

# What is a Child Contact Centre ?

- Child Contact Centres are independent voluntary charitable organisations set up to facilitate contact between a child and his/her parents, or other family members, with whom they no longer live, or perhaps with whom they have never lived.
- Child Contact Centres are not an extension of the courts and are independent of the legal system.
- Apart from confirmation of attendance, no reports will be prepared for the court. Staff and volunteers are not available to be called as witnesses unless it is a criminal matter.
- Child Contact Centres provide supported contact as distinct from supervised contact. No one-to-one supervision occurs or can be facilitated. Further information on supervised contact is available from your local Health and Social Care Trust.
- Contact provided through a Child Contact Centre is a temporary arrangement, to be reviewed after an agreed period of time. Child Contact Centres provide a stage in the journey that separating families make. That journey can range from no contact, often with high levels of hostility, through to building up trust in each other's abilities and commitment to their children. The ultimate aim for parents/other family members is to move on from Contact Centres and to make their own parenting time arrangements.
- Staff and volunteers manage the environment to ensure no distress or risk is presented to Children or other users of the service, including terminating contact sessions that are disruptive.

# Your Local Child Contact Centre

- Child Contact Centres in Northern Ireland are accredited by either the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC) or the Northern Ireland Network of Child Contact Centres.
- You can find out more, including details of Child Contact Centres in Northern Ireland, by visiting:
  - [www.childcontactni.org](http://www.childcontactni.org)
  - [www.familysupportni.gov.uk](http://www.familysupportni.gov.uk)
  - [www.naccc.org.uk](http://www.naccc.org.uk),

**"As a family law practitioner, I see first hand the importance of contact centres. Many of the families I have worked with owe a great deal of gratitude to the centres and the volunteers who make them possible"**

**"The centre has been a safe place where my son can see his father without any difficult and upsetting handovers between us."**

**"It is great to see contact between a child and their non-resident parent arrive at the stage when they can meet outside the centre, a success story."**

## How are the visits arranged ?

- Visits are by referral. The main channel of referral for users of the service is through the Court system/solicitors and sometimes social services.
- The courts play a crucial role in the process, particularly in relation to the families they order to use the Centres and in considering what is in the best interests of the child.
- Child Contact Centres require all potential users of the service to submit a fully completed referral form in agreement with the resident parent or the resident parent's solicitor. Non-completion of the form will result in delay and potential rejection of the referral. The completion of the referral form is the responsibility of the applicant and their legal advisor. Where the applicant is representing themselves they will own the responsibility of completing the referral form.
- Child Contact Centres require all information relating to relevant criminal activities which are presently being investigated by the police; are awaiting a decision by PPS or previous criminal activities which have resulted in a caution/conviction or incarceration to be detailed at the initial point of referral. Subsequent discovery will result in use of the Centre being terminated. Centres have a duty of care to all staff, volunteers and all users of the service and the ability to carry out a robust risk assessment is essential.
- Typically any issues of concern in relation to contact will be raised with referrers, Social Workers or Court Children's Officers if involved. Where there are child protection concerns cases will be referred to the Local Gateway team and the referrers will be informed.

## Expectations of the Child Contact Centres

- Centres require all potential users to attend a pre-visit appointment at which the rules and conditions for use of the Centre will be outlined and the suitability for contact to occur in the Centre to be assessed.
- These appointments will be offered by the Coordinator, depending on Centre space and availability. Pre-visits tend to last 20-30 minutes and are an opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns, and to set contact agreements in place. Adults are welcome to bring children to visit the Centre with another adult available to supervise the child, or volunteers can assist, while the parent/carer meets with staff.
- All parents will be asked to sign the Centre's consent form agreeing to the Centre's procedures and the terms under which the Centre is available for use.
- Centres require all users of the service to continue to comply with the rules and behaviours of the Centre as agreed at the pre-visit meeting otherwise use of the Centre will be suspended or terminated.



## Court Orders

- Child Contact Centres need to know if an order has been issued by the Court in respect of contact and whether the order issued is a full order. A full order is the final order made by the Court.
- A copy of the relevant Court Order must be sent to the relevant Contact Centre in all instances.
- There is a common misconception that, where a full order is issued, the centre has no choice but to provide the facility for as long as the parents wish to remain. Child Contact Centres will not accept full orders unless specifically agreed in advance with the individual centre and where a maximum time limit is provided. Individual Child Contact Centres can reject full orders where these orders have no set time limits for the duration of the contact. Child Contact Centres are not facilities to be used to accommodate indefinite or long-term contact arrangements as this would ultimately reduce the availability of the service to a wider range of families.
- Child Contact Centres require being informed of any changes to agreements/orders as contact progresses, including being advised by solicitors when use of the Child Contact Centre is no longer required thus minimising the potential for waiting lists. All changes to contact must be negotiated through the referrer.



## What Happens at a Child Contact Centre ?

- A Child Contact Centre aims to provide a welcoming and suitable environment where you and your children can relax and enjoy yourselves.
- Staff and volunteers work hard to tailor each session to the age/ability/preferences of the children. The Centre will have a variety of games, toys and books for children of all ages. Several families are usually together in one or a number of rooms.
- Parents do not have to meet – the Centre staff can deal with the handover of your child so you don't need to meet your ex-partner if you don't want to.
- The centre is run by fully trained staff and volunteers who provide an impartial and confidential approach at all times. They do not take sides and they work to a strict confidentiality policy. They are available for practical assistance and keeping a watchful eye. They do not closely monitor or evaluate contact or conversations between parent and child.
- The Coordinator is responsible for overseeing the running of the Contact Centre which includes preparation with volunteers, conducting pre-visits with family members and attendance during the session.
- A volunteer at a Child Contact Centre is primarily responsible for facilitating meaningful contact between a child or children and a non-resident parent. They help to prepare the centre before children arrive; welcome families and show them around; listen to adults and children without judging; make refreshments and tidy up once the centre is closed.
- All staff and volunteers will have been subject to AccessNI checks. The Centre will have a Child Protection Policy which you can see upon request. All volunteers have an understanding of what constitutes child abuse and procedures that need to be followed to report or prevent it.