

Child contact centres...



**So you would like to be a
volunteer at a child contact
centre?**

contact
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
CHILD CONTACT CENTRES

Promoting safe contact within a
national framework of child contact centres and services

So you would like to be a volunteer at a child contact centre?

Foreword

This booklet is aimed at people who are thinking about or have just become volunteers in a child contact centre. Experienced volunteers may also want to read it as a refresher to help remind them about why child contact centres are needed and their role in them.

The National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC) hopes its member centres will find this booklet of help as they go about the task of providing what has now become an essential service for many families. It also hopes that more people will become involved with child contact centres as a result of reading it.

NACCC

Introduction

Do you know of a family where the children have had to experience the emotional and practical difficulties arising from their parents either separating or divorcing? It is estimated that one in three children in the UK will experience parental separation before the age of 16¹, but research shows the negative impacts of separation on children can be reduced². Although it might not be easy, many of these children come from homes where the adults responsible for them are able to resolve any problems about their care without the intervention of a solicitor or the courts. Some parents are using the Parent Connection online programme 'Getting it right for children'³.



Unfortunately there have been and always will be a number of families who find it difficult to agree about the arrangements for their children after a separation or divorce. In many cases these difficulties arise because the adults involved do not trust and can not communicate with each other. The reasons for this lack of trust and communication can be many and varied, but often include concerns about a child's safety or domestic violence. Solicitors, Courts and CAFCASS officers faced with these kind of problems and difficulties with arranging contact between a non-resident parent and their children will often turn to a child contact centre for help.

There are around 350 child contact centres that are members of NACCC. These child contact centres have an accreditation process which shows that all NACCC child contact centres work to agreed and approved national standards which ensure that families using the child contact centres are safe and well cared for. These child contact centres are largely staffed by volunteers who, when talking about their work, have said...

"I am responding to a local need and putting something back into the community."

"The work has given me a better understanding of human nature and helped me to become more adaptable and open minded."

"I have learned to appreciate my own family."

"I love children."

Like many voluntary organisations child contact centres always need new volunteers. The successful running of centres is dependent upon these new volunteers having an understanding of:

- what a child contact centre is;
- why they are needed;
- how they are organised and run;
- a volunteer's role and responsibilities within a child contact centre.

This booklet has been designed to answer these questions and allow new volunteers to enter into child contact centre work on an informed basis. Much of the material in it has been taken from either the *NACCC Guidance Manual* or training sessions provided to new centres by NACCC's support staff. It is advisable to use both these resources along with this booklet.

¹ Maclean, M. (2004). *Together and Apart: Children and Parents Experiencing Separation and Divorce*. London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

² Coleman, L. & Glenn, F. (2009). *When couples part: Understanding the consequences for adults and children*. OnePlusOne.

³ <http://theparentconnection.org.uk> – click on 'Programmes'.

What is a child contact centre?

A child contact centre is a meeting place where children of separated families can enjoy contact with one (or both) parents, and sometimes other family members, in a comfortable and safe environment when there is no viable alternative.

What do they provide?

- An environment where contact will be child centred.
- A warm and comfortable atmosphere for both parents and children.
- A safe caring environment where a parent with 'care' can leave a child with confidence.
- A place where there will be no arguments or family rows.
- Time for the children to relax and enjoy the company of a non-resident parent.



Who benefits? - children

"When Mum and Dad spilt up I was glad. The rowing stopped and Mum didn't cry anymore. After a while though I began to miss my Dad. When I asked Mum she said it was best that I didn't see him, as she didn't want him coming to the house. Dad must have missed me too because he went to a solicitor who arranged for us to meet at a child contact centre. We have been meeting there for about six months and I always look forward to Saturday afternoons."

As this quote demonstrates, most children feel attached to both their parents and want them to have a good relationship whether they are together or apart. Where this does not happen and there are a significant number of changes in their lives, children can experience feelings of:

- insecurity...** *"Will I be moving house, changing school and having to make new friends?"*
- anger...** *"Why has this happened to me?"*
- guilt...** *"It's my fault that mum and dad have split up."*
- sadness...** *"I love my mum and my dad, why can't things just go back to what they used to be?"*
- confusion...** *"Where will I be going next Saturday?"*
- anxiety...** *"Who is going to be there and will they speak to me?"*
- helplessness...** *"Nobody ever asks me what I think or how I feel."*

What can happen if these feelings are allowed to continue?



If children are denied regular contact with a non-resident parent, they may start to:

feel rejected or abandoned...

"Why have they gone away and left me?"

blame themselves for what has happened...

"It must have been something I said or did."

become withdrawn and depressed...

"It hurts too much to talk about it."

feel increasingly insecure...

"What's going to happen next and will anybody tell me?"

take unnecessary risks or harm themselves...

"I just don't care any more."

become rebellious or anti-social...

"It's the only way I can get any attention."

argue and fight excessively at either home or school...

"Nobody understands me!"

experience difficulties in establishing happy and lasting relationships when they grow up...

"Is this what's going to happen to me?"

Research has shown that in the majority of cases children benefit from regular contact with both their parents. Despite this, some parents find it hard to agree on contact arrangements for their children once they have separated. By providing a safe, comfortable and child-centred meeting-place, child contact centres can ensure that the children involved in these disputes not only see a non-resident parent but also:

- cope more effectively with the end of their parent's relationship;
- have greater peace of mind and more secure sense of personal identity;
- become less likely to suffer either short or long term emotional harm;
- have stronger links with and a better understanding of their family roots/culture.

Pulling all these together and in the words of a little girl:

"I loved him although I didn't know him, for now having the courage to come back and be there for me now".



Who benefits? – parents

Divorce results in the death of a marriage but does not have the finality of a physical death. The vestiges of a former way of life remain to remind and overshadow a present existence. Its hurt goes deep and is accompanied by the doubt that it will ever heal."

The end of a marriage or a relationship normally results in adults and children going through periods of:

- breakdown...** *"I just didn't see it coming. He says he doesn't love me anymore."*
- shock...** *"I cannot sleep, but I'm exhausted. I have a dull ache that doesn't go away."*
- anger...** *"I was planning her destruction and then imagining her crawling back to me, begging for forgiveness."*
- pain...** *"This is really hurting me."*
- hatred...** *"How could I ever have loved her when she is making it so difficult now?"*
- grief...** *"We were so happy – a perfect family with so much to live for."*
- acceptance...** *"The best revenge of all is to pull yourself together and get on with life and be happy."*

Where these difficulties are accompanied by problems arranging contact between a child and a non-resident parent, child contact centres can sometimes help by encouraging the people involved to:

- put their child's best interests first;
- co-operate over child-care and contact arrangements;
- keep their own disagreements away from their child.

The success of child contact centres in helping parents to work together for the benefit of their children is reflected in the following two statements:

"I would like to say that I've found the child contact centre very helpful regarding myself and the father of my two daughters, as before this service we were unable to speak to each other without it turning into a row."

"The support and use of a child contact centre has been essential in maintaining contact between my children and I. As my ex-wife and I had no immediate families to support us I really don't know what would have happened if a child contact centre had not been available."

Child contact centre volunteers often notice the same and will on occasions be heard to say:

"Some parents have problems when they first arrive but eventually learn to trust each other again".



How is a child contact centre organised and run?

The trauma and distress which accompanies family breakdown means that contact can often be an awkward, stressful and sometimes distressing experience for adults and children alike. These emotions manifest themselves in different ways but child contact centre staff frequently find that:

- parents do not want to meet or speak to each other;
- children have not seen a non-resident parent for some time;
- some children may have been told negative things about their non-resident parent in advance of coming to the centre;
- tensions become so great that people will on occasions become upset or angry.



All of this means it is important that child contact centres are organised and run in a way which ensures that they:

- maintain a stance of impartiality when working with parents and other family members;
- maintain a strict code of confidentiality at all times;
- make parents aware that they are responsible for the safety and supervision of their children at the centre;
- know who will be attending for contact and know whether a child will be able to leave the centre;
- keep an accurate record concerning who is in the centre at any one time;
- are aware that the presence of new partners or members of either parent's family can sometimes cause unnecessary friction and disruption;
- do not act as a place for negotiation;
- follow the appropriate Government Health and Safety guidelines;
- have a process for dealing with complaints.

Does the centre have any rules?

All child contact centres have a basic set of rules which families using them will be made aware of and asked to accept. These rules are necessary to ensure the centre is a safe child-centred environment where families can relax and rebuild broken relationships. You will be made aware of the rules that apply to your centre if you agree to become a volunteer.

Could I be a volunteer?

What qualities do I need to be a volunteer?

"Working in a child contact centre has made me more adaptable and open-minded."

"You have to be patient and compassionate."

These two statements were made by existing volunteers and sum up much of what is required, but in general terms, child contact centre volunteers need to be:

discreet... *Although it can sometimes be difficult it is essential that volunteers have and maintain a strict code of confidentiality. Put simply this means "You must never talk about what you have seen and heard."*

impartial... *"Everybody has a story to tell but you must not voice an opinion or take sides."*

caring... *"Many families develop a good relationship with child contact centre volunteers because they feel that we are not part of the system, we are not judging them and we listen to them."*

enthusiastic... *"We always need people who have new ideas and can help the rest of us along."*

tolerant... *"There will be times when your patience is stretched to breaking point."*

reliable... *"The centre will only work well if everybody does their bit."*

sensitive... *"A lot of people will be confused, apprehensive, angry or frightened and therefore need a sympathetic ear."*

How much time will I need to give?

Many child contact centres organise their volunteers into teams, others do not, but whatever system a centre operates an experienced person should always be on duty. Similarly, and in keeping with NACCC guidelines there will never be less than three volunteers on duty. All of this means that most volunteers find they are working in the centre one Saturday morning or afternoon every 4 to 6 weeks.

What will I have to do?

A volunteer at a child contact centre is primarily responsible for facilitating contact between a child or children and a non-resident parent. They will also be asked to:

- help prepare the centre in advance of people arriving;
- welcome visitors;
- register centre visitors;
- act as a host who:
 - explains the use of the facilities;
 - arranges toys;
 - arranges refreshments;



And finally:

- tidy up once the centre has closed.
- Spend a short period of time talking to the leader and other volunteers about what has happened during the contact session.

Some centres operate a system where named volunteers are responsible for particular tasks. Others adopt a more flexible approach and allow their volunteers to move between the different tasks. Whatever system or approach a centre is using you can be assured that your input will be of value and appreciated.

How should I approach working in a child contact centre?

Be yourself and try to be...

cheerful but not artificial...

"People almost always respond well to somebody who is warm and interested in them."

assertive but not dominant...

"It is important for families to know what the centre can provide and what is expected of them."

re-assuring...

"Some people will be worried about coming to the centre and how their former partner or children might react to them."

able to build relationships whilst remaining impartial...

"It often helps to know something about the practical and emotional impact of separation or divorce upon the families who are using the centre."

Able to deal with difficult situations and with parents under stress...

"Problems can arise sometimes but serious incidents are rare."

being prepared to work as part of a team where people exchange information and support one another...

"Teamwork makes it possible to cope with the more difficult aspects of the work or the bits you could find yourself taking home and worrying about!"

What are the rewards of working in a child contact centre?

Once again it is probably best to begin by looking at what volunteers and people using child contact centres have said. Starting with the volunteers:



"There are some afternoons where everything goes well and there is very little to do."

"The rewards outweigh the problems and disappointments."

"We need to help children develop successful relationships so that they can become good parents themselves."

Moving on to the parents:

"The centre was absolutely brilliant for me and Susan to start building our relationship after a long and hurtful gap. I have never met a kinder group of people in my life. I am now seeing Susan every Saturday from 9am - 6pm. We go anywhere and everywhere and now she telephones me in the week. Our bond and love for each other is beautiful. All of this was made possible by Janet and all of you at the centre. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Finally and combining the children and their parents in a way which many volunteers find particularly satisfying:

"I was shown into the hall and directed to a table away from the other families. Suddenly the boys came running to me, their arms open both shouting DADDY! DADDY! DADDY! Big hugs for each one. It was like a rugby scrum only for once I was crying. They had not forgotten me."

So what do I do next?

Working in a child contact centre is not for everybody. If you feel that this is not for you then thank you for taking the time to read this booklet and we hope you will enter into another form of voluntary work elsewhere.

There are two possible routes to follow if you **are** interested in becoming a volunteer at a child contact centre.

1. Contact the co-ordinator of your local child contact centre.
2. Contact NACCC who will then put you in touch with the co-ordinator of a centre close to your home.

Once you have spoken to the co-ordinator of your local child contact centre, and if you have decided to become a volunteer, the coordinator will then arrange for you to go through a recognised application process. As you will be working with children, the process will involve you completing an application form, obtaining a reference and completing the appropriate safeguarding children checks. Once you have completed this process, arrangements can then be made for you to start some induction training and begin working in the centre.



Finally, if you decide to become a child contact centre volunteer you will be joining a group of people whose work has, in the past, and continues to make, a very real difference for a significant number of families throughout the whole of the United Kingdom.

This booklet was written and compiled by the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC) which is a national charity supporting around 350 Member Centres.

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