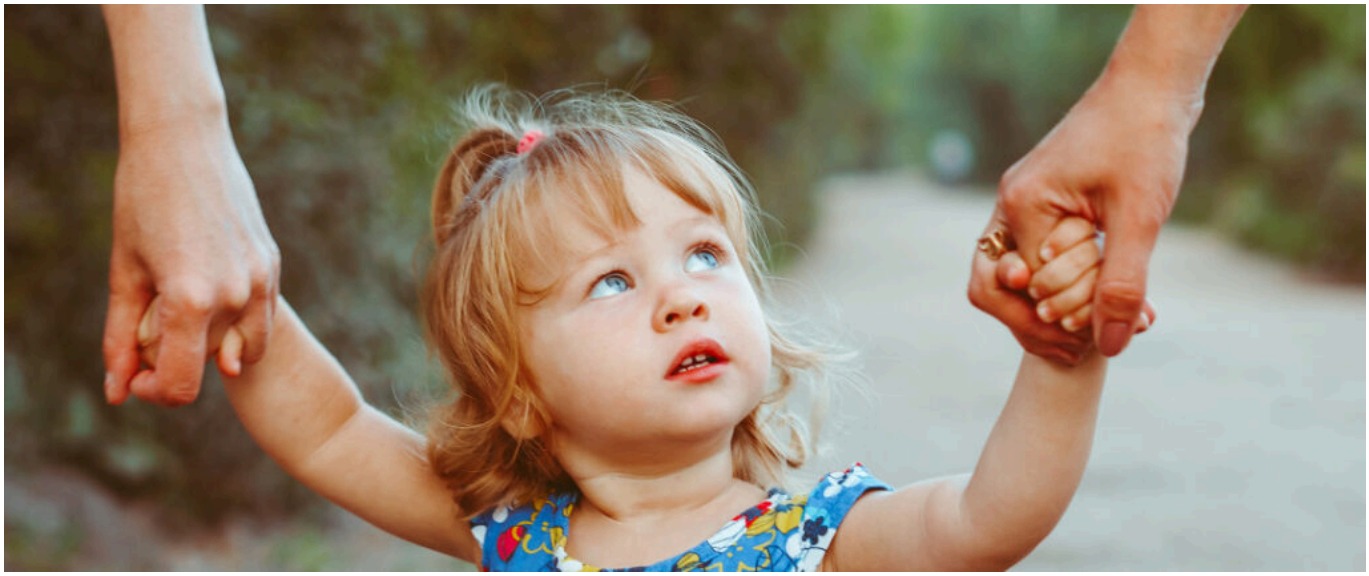
Let’s talk about children’s contact centres: FAQs answered by the Parent Education Network (Penguin)

written by SRFL Team | 16 November 2023



Working with separating parents and their children in family law matters highlights the challenges that families can face when navigating new a family dynamic. Co-parenting can be hard, and you won’t always get it right the first time. Ultimately, the family law system aims to keep children safe while aiding them in having a meaningful relationship with both their parents. Sometimes families need some help to achieve this.

> “To a child, love is spelled T – I – M – E.”
>
> – Dr Justin Coulson, Happy Families

Contact centres strive to make reuniting families a less stressful and a more positive experience. They operate from a position that maintaining family relationships in times of separation is key for both parents and children, which is why a supervised contact service helps bridge the gap between them during these difficult times.

We recently spoke with Lucy Schweizer Cook, Centre Director, of the Parent Education Network (Penguin) about children’s contact centres. Penguin is a Gold Coast based children’s contact centre.

> “The Parent Education Network supports children and families with services, education and resources that enable them to become the best parents they can be. We nurture the parent-child relationship by providing safe, secure, and supportive supervised contact visits and changeovers.”
>
> – Lucy Schweizer Cook

Penguin is a little unique in that its founder, Lucy, comes from a teaching background with a specialty in early childhood education, development and care, children with additional needs and child safety and protection. For Penguin she saw a great opportunity to bring the high quality and best practices she expected in early childhood into the human services sector.

What is a contact centre and why would I use one?

A contact centre can provide additional support and services to help families come together during this time of transition. Contact centres provide a safe space for families which is especially important in circumstances where there may be challenges for children in managing the change to their family structure, and with parents who may not be fully equipped to deal with their parental responsibilities due to illness, addiction, or behavioural issues.

Parents use contact centres for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they are court-ordered or agreed to through mediation. Sometimes, though, they are through private arrangement, where parents are having difficulty co-parenting.

There are two main types of contact centres, public and private. Public centres receive some government funding so sessions can be

cheaper, though this often means they have very long waiting lists. Private centres are often smaller and can provide quite a personalised service. Each private centre has their own offerings and fees, and you need to discuss this with them direct.

Penguin is a quality centre and maintains high standards as a member of the *Australian Children's Contact Services Association, Family Law Practitioners Association and Family & Relationships Services Australia*. You should look for this type of industry standing when choosing a contact centre.

Penguin provides multiple opportunities, resources, and games to enable interactions to occur between both the parent and child. The supervised parent is required to bring a snack or meal for the visit depending on the time of day and what both parents have agreed to on intake. Each centre will be slightly different.

The visiting parent should always arrive at a centre prepared to have a good time within the agreed limits of the centre. The other co-parent should aim to be positive of the interaction and support their child in spending time with the other parent. Ultimately, children are looking for demonstrations of love and acceptance; the other factors, such as adult conflict and court proceedings, are not important to them.

How long will it take to get into a centre – is there a waiting list?

There is no set answer for this. Many children's contact centres have waiting lists, so it is important to phone your centre of choice, at the earliest possible opportunity. Some services offered have no waiting lists. For example, there may be a waiting list for supervised visits but not for facilitated changeovers.

What is the intake process?

Children's Contact Services are independent services and not bound by court orders or parenting agreements. Most services will, however, undertake a thorough intake assessment to determine whether safe and child-focused arrangements can be facilitated and, if so, will attempt to maintain the spirit of the agreement (subject to resources). Services are likely to make referrals to other support services if they cannot assist you at that time.

At Penguin, our supervisors will explain the process for using the service when you make contact – this will include an intake assessment, where an exploration of the issues around your situation will be conducted to see if the proposed arrangements can be properly managed. Penguin will inform you of the outcome of the assessment process and it is there that you are likely to get some idea of whether the arrangements can proceed or whether other options need to be considered. It is important to seek additional support (such as counselling) if you find that you, and/or your children, are struggling with waiting periods or the stresses attached to the separation.

How does the intake session work?

The individual intake process may differ at different centres, but the purpose of the intake remains the same – to understand the parent's visitation or changeover needs.

At the Penguin Centre, both parents will make separate times for an in-person intake meeting with the Centre. Prior to the meeting, the parents will be required to fill in documentation relating to their family and children, at Penguin both parents are asked to complete their own intake form and one for each of their children. This way the centre gets a full picture of each child's relationship with each parent, setting them and their parents up for a successful visit.

Penguin provides parents with an email outlining any documentation that needs to be brought to the intake session and the process that intake follows.

Most importantly, there should also be an opportunity for the child/children to have an orientation visit before their first contact visit. These visits only last a short amount of time, just enough for your child to choose toys and games they want to play with the next time they come. They also enable children to create a connection with a supervisor, thus commencing the building of trust.

What is the contact centre supervisor's role?

The role of a contact centre supervisor is to be a non-bias third party and ensure both the parent and child have fun and remain safe. The aim of a supervised contact visit is to help initiate, support, or develop the relationship between a child and a parent during separation. At all times, the child is the focus.

Supervised changeovers are a way to ensure children are transferred from one parent's custody to another in a safe, neutral space, eliminating the child/children being involved in any conflict or tension.

> "At Penguin we support the parent to be the parent and take a strengths-based view."
> – Lucy Schweizer Cook

A supervisor will always be present to monitor the child's physical and emotional well-being. The supervisor, as a neutral third party, will also take balanced, unbiased, observational notes.

All centres compile observation notes for each visit which can be requested and shared with both parties. Some centres offer family report writing as well. Many centres also have large networks of services that they can link parents into as needed such as counsellors.

Parenting Programs – what are they?

Many contact centres also provide Parenting Programs in addition to offering a safe venue for supervised contact and changeovers.

Parenting programs aim to assist separating parents to look at their parenting role and how to co-parent in an effective and supporting way. Importantly they also help parents understand how to effectively support their children during change and build the skills required for the future.

By upskilling parents, children benefit. Parenting programs assist to develop skills that:

- build trust between parents and their child/children so everyone feels secure and understood.
- ensure that everyone remains child focused.
- support family relationships, so children can move at their own pace.
- provide a fun and engaging environment, at Penguin this includes a backyard just like home!

Penguin offers two parenting programs, the PAST – Parenting After Separation & Transition Program and the Circle of Security Program, as well as parenting coaching.

How can we set our child up for success when using a contact centre?

A quality contact centre will provide parents and guardians with information and help in assisting the children in having safe, comfortable, and satisfying visits. At Penguin this is a central goal. Following the rules and guidelines of the service is the basis of this happening. Orientation is also very important for both parents and children. The parents the child lives with should be positive and encourage the children to enjoy their visit.

After the visit, parents and/or guardians should strive to be willing to listen if the children want to talk about the visit but should never pump the child for information or be negative about what is occurring.

> "Having a parent who listens creates a child who believes he or she has a voice that matters in this world."
>
> – Rachel Macy Stafford, Parenting Author

Conclusion

We are grateful to Lucy and the Penguin Team for sharing their insights with us about the role of contact centres and the services they can offer families going through the family law system. The safety and wellbeing of children is paramount and there is an important role for contact centres in achieving this outcome.

The team at Penguin strive hard to help families maintain relationships even during times of conflict and division. Lucy shared with us how the underlying value of integrity is integral to the work at Penguin, emphasising the importance of doing the right thing, even when no one is looking.

> "I've spent a lot of time talking to children about Integrity. The way you explain it is like this – Integrity is about doing the right thing even when no-one is looking."
> – Lucy Schweizer Cook

In the end, what matters most to children is feeling loved and accepted, transcending adult conflicts and legal proceedings.

Free initial consultation: Contact us to discuss your personal situation.

We hope you have found this information to be of use in giving you an understanding of our firm and the work we do specifically in relation to Family Law and matters related to Family Law. We know that every family law matter is unique, and your personal circumstances require you to receive personalised legal advice that considers your specific needs, objectives, and circumstances. We strongly encourage you to contact our office to talk to us about your personal circumstances and how this information specifically applies to your situation. We welcome you to get in touch with us to book a free initial consultation with our team.

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