

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF AROUND FAMILY TIME

A Resource for Parents written by Family Inclusion Strategies Hunter Peer Parent Expert

Family time can bring up big feelings, joy, sadness, anger, grief, hope. It is normal for visits to feel emotional, both during and afterwards.

Looking after yourself helps you stay strong for your children and for your own healing.

It can help to have a [support plan](#) in place:

- Someone to call afterwards; a trusted friend, family member, peer worker, or support person who understands
- A self-care activity: something that helps you calm down or feel steady (like going for a walk, listening to music, journaling, or whatever works for you)
- Time to reflect; writing your own family time record can help you notice what went well and how you're growing as parent.

Taking care of yourself is not selfish, it's part of taking care of your children. When you look after your own wellbeing, you are better able to be present, calm, and loving in your children's lives.

Family time can be difficult. For many parents, it is the most important part of the week and the hardest. Being with your child while knowing you can't take them home yet can bring up grief, anxiety, and deep longing. These feelings are a natural response to separation, not a reflection of your parenting.

Hello and Goodbye routines can help prepare you and your child and give you something consistent.

Children can also show big emotions during family time. Tears, clinginess, anger, or withdrawal are common reactions to missing you. These responses often show how strong the bond is, not that family time is harmful or going badly. It's important to be looking after yourself so you can support your child in this moment.

Parents are often expected to stay calm, present, and emotionally contained during family time, even while navigating fear, hope, and heartbreak. This pressure can make family time feel overwhelming. Needing support, finding it hard, or feeling emotional does not mean you are failing it means you are human and you care deeply about your child.

"Family time was the moment I held onto all week, and also the moment that broke me. I walked in trying to be strong and calm for my child, knowing I would have to hand them back again. Every goodbye felt like another loss. But even when it hurt, I showed up because being there, loving them, and letting them feel that love got me through the dark moments without them, my consistency was also what helped me get them home."

Tips from some of our Parents

What parents have done to support themselves at family time

Hello routines – what parents say has helped

- *"I always sit on the floor first so my kids come to me, not the other way around."*
- *"I say the same sentence every time: 'I'm here and I'm not going anywhere while we're together.'"*
- *"We start with something familiar – colouring or Lego – so it doesn't feel awkward or rushed."*
- *"I stopped asking lots of questions at the start. I let my child warm up in their own time."*
- *"I remind myself this isn't the moment to prove anything. It's just about being present."*

Goodbye routines – what parents have done

- *"I stopped sneaking out. I always say goodbye properly, even when it hurts."*
- *"I tell my child exactly when I'll see them next, even if it's weeks away."*
- *"We have a goodbye phrase we always use. It gives us something to hold onto."*
- *"I help my child pack their bag or walk them back calmly so they don't feel dropped."*
- *"I learned that leaving calmly helps them regulate – even when I'm falling apart inside."*

How parents look after themselves during family time

- *"I stopped watching the worker's body language and focused only on my child."*
- *"If I felt myself panicking, I slowed everything down – my voice, my movements."*
- *"I stopped trying to be 'fun' the whole time and allowed quiet moments."*
- *"I told myself: this hour matters, even if the system doesn't reflect that."*

What parents do after family time to cope

- *"I don't drive home straight away. I sit in my car and cry before I go."*
- *"I plan one thing for after family time so I don't spiral."*
- *"I learned not to be alone after visits – that's when things got dangerous for me."*
- *"I call someone who understands instead of pretending I'm fine."*
- *"I stopped judging myself for how wrecked I feel afterwards."*

What parents wish they'd known earlier

- *"The pain after family time doesn't mean the visit was bad – it means the bond is real."*
- *"You don't have to be strong all the time. You just have to survive it."*
- *"Needing support after family time is not a failure – it's a risk for me if I don't get it."*

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