

FAMILY VISITATION IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

BRIEF | **JAN 2017**
Washington State

SUMMARY

Current research shows consistent and frequent visitation between parents and their children in out-of-home care can reduce trauma for children.^{1,2,3} Visitation is crucial to strengthening and maintaining family relationships and is linked to positive outcomes, including improved child well-being, less time in out-of-home care, and faster reunification when it is in the best interest of the child.⁴ Although it is common for parents involved in the child welfare system to attend a parent education program,⁵ only a few parenting programs were developed specifically to meet the needs of parents and families in the child welfare system. Furthermore, while visitation is a crucial time when parenting skills could be increased, very few efforts are being made around parenting skills during visitation.⁶ Supervised visits represent an untapped and vital opportunity to address child and family needs in order to improve visit quality and potentially receive a greater return on the investment made in visits each year - roughly \$20 million annually in Washington alone. Partners for Our Children (POC), in close collaboration with the Children's Administration, aims to address this by developing a first-of-its-kind parent support program designed to improve the quality of parent-child visits.

BACKGROUND

Washington State had no consistent policy or guidance on family visitation until 2003, when the state passed a bill to maintain sibling relationships for dependent children (ESSB 5779). A year later, another bill was passed relating to family visitation for dependent children, requiring the Children's Administration to develop and implement consistent statewide policies and protocols based on current best practices (SB 6643). The new law established visitation as the right of the family. When a child is removed from the home, visitation should occur soon after. Maximum parent-child contact is encouraged and determined to be in the best interest of the child - for his/her health, safety, and overall well-being. Visitation cannot be limited as a sanction for a parent's failure to comply with court orders.

The 2015 budget passed by the legislature then included the following language related to visitation policies and practices:

The Children's Administration (CA) shall adopt policies to reduce the percentage of parents requiring supervised visitation, including clarification of the threshold for

transition from supervised to unsupervised visitation prior to reunification. The Children's Administration shall submit the revised visitation policy to the appropriate policy and fiscal committees of the legislature by December 1, 2015.⁷

In the early fall of 2015, CA brought a group of advocates/stakeholders together to help inform the process of developing new policies and practices. A number of recommendations were made, including: starting with the assumption that visits would be unsupervised and, consequently, requiring that a case be made to have supervised or monitored visits; incorporating parent coaching (when appropriate) by a trained individual into supervised visits; making it clear to caregivers and others why visits are so important; and developing strategies to increase factors that might lead to better-quality visits, such as enhancing communication between parent(s) and caregivers. The visitation report has been submitted to the legislature, and, while a number of changes are being made to the policy manual, the inclusion of "parent coaching" is not being addressed.

BENEFITS OF VISITATION

Children who are removed from their home due to neglect and/or abuse and placed in out-of-home care often experience emotional trauma.⁸ Many children are overwhelmed with feelings, such as anger, nervousness, sadness, or fear. Separation anxiety is a common response, especially among younger children who don't have the ability to understand the reason for separation, and do not have the coping skills to deal with long periods of uncertainty.⁹ As a result, children can feel hurt or rejected and may believe their parents do not want to see them anymore. Visitations can help mitigate these effects and improve outcomes for children and families.

Faster Reunification and Shorter Stays in Out-of-Home Care. Research shows that consistent and frequent family visitation is a best practice for families in dependency cases.¹⁰ Contact between a child and his/her biological family is the single most important factor related to whether the child remains in out-of-home care. Visitation is strongly associated with shorter placement time and faster family reunification. During visitation, the parent-child attachment is strengthened, helping to prepare families for the transition from out-of-home care to returning home, and increasing the likelihood of lasting reunification.

Increases Child Well-Being. Research also shows a positive correlation between parent-child visitation and children's well-being while in placement care.¹¹ Children who frequently visit with their parents are more likely to have higher well-being ratings and adjust well to placement than children who visit less frequently or never visit. In addition, children who have frequent contact with their parents have lower levels of depression and "acting out" behavior.¹²

ENHANCING VISITATION IN WASHINGTON STATE

Visits are necessary for parents to maintain their relationship with and regain custody of their children after they are placed in foster care, but this experience is stressful on both sides. Children might be frightened or angry and act out. Parents, often grappling with a variety of other issues, including substance abuse and mental health challenges, may feel defensive and discouraged. Without meaningful support, it is hardly a scenario

conducive to effective parenting or supporting the well-being of children. Research shows that effective visitation is more than just having one-on-one contact with your child; using these visits to build parental skills is important.¹³ Research suggests that pairing visitation with a supportive parenting program is an effective way to increase reunification.¹⁴

Strive: An Emerging Best Practice. POC is working closely with the Children's Administration to develop and test the *Strive* Visitation program.¹⁵ The goal of *Strive* is to engage parents early in the visitation process, assist parents in preparing for high quality visits with their children, and promote child safety. *Strive* uses a strengths-based, trauma-informed approach to help parents create a positive environment for nurturing their relationship with their child or children within the context of supervised visitation. Through the program, parents are connected with a "Visit Navigator" (visit supervisor trained in *Strive*) who meets with them weekly during the program to cover session content and to support them in visits to "try out" new knowledge and skills. A Visit Navigator had the following to say about a parent with whom she was working:

"I was able to ask the parent about how she feels about the program...what did she think about the session? She was really grateful to have the debrief time and to get feedback...to be able, collectively, to talk about her daughter. She visited before Strive. She looks different...there's a weight off of her. I asked her what it was. She said 'I have accepted the circumstances for what they are.' She used to be closed off and didn't speak as much. Now she is talking to other staff and her being able to accept the circumstance...she does her hair and dresses a bit better. It's amazing. It was really good for me. In a regular visit, we don't know what's going on with the parent. I can see the difference."

The initial 15-session pretest of the program received a positive response from Visit Navigators and parents alike and helped to identify that the first five sessions of the program provided essential information and support to parents and appeared to encourage early engagement in visits. Revisions were made to the first five sessions, and a pilot of the five-session "Engagement Module" is now underway. The pilot will continue into 2017 with 50

parents receiving the *Strive* Engagement Module and 50 parents receiving supervised visitation services-as-usual. The pilot includes seven Children's Administration offices in three counties in Western Washington and four supervised visitation providers. POC is collaborating with the Children's Administration to review pilot data and determine next steps to more broadly implement *Strive*.

OTHER RELATED WORK: VISITATION AND THE SPOKANE AREA NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR – FAMILY IMPACT NETWORK

The initial focus of Family Impact Network (FIN) has been supervised visitation. FIN is contracting directly with visitation providers and monitoring wait times and other data elements through a newly designed software-based platform called "Oliver". As a result, the Network Administrator is able to compare various visitation-related metrics among the contractors and easily provide such information in a timely fashion to caseworkers and others at CA. With this information, workers can make more informed decisions about which providers to use in order to best serve children and families.

¹ Smariga, M. *Visitation with infants and toddlers in foster care: What judges and attorneys need to know*. American Bar Association. 2007. Retrieved from http://www.ct.gov/ccpa/lib/ccpa/birth_to_three_and_visitation_aba_child_law_center_doc.pdf

² Mallon, G. P. & Hess, P. *Visits: Critical to the well being and permanency of children and youth in care*. In Hess, P. and Mallon, G. (Eds.), *Child welfare for the twenty-first century: A handbook of practices, policies and programs*, pp. 548-557. New York: Columbia University Press. 2005.

³ Haight, W. L., Kagle, J., & Black, J. *Understanding and supporting parent-child relationships during foster care visits: Attachment theory and research*. *Social Work*, 48, 195- 207. 2003.

⁴ Mallon & Hess, 2005; Hess, 2003.

⁵ Barth, R. P., Crea, T. M., John, K., Thoburn, J., Quinton, D. *Beyond attachment theory and therapy: Towards sensitive and evidence-based interventions with foster and adoptive families in distress*. *Child and Family Social Work*, 10, 257–268. 2005.

⁶ Haight, W. L., Sokolec, J., Budde, S., & Poertner, J. *Conducting parent-child visits*. Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, Children's Research Center. (2001)

⁷ WA State Legislature Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 6052, Sec 202 (14) page 44

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since parent-child visitation is such a critical component of successful reunification or achieving another permanent plan, Partners for Our Children recommends:

- Assuming that parent-child visits will be unsupervised unless there are compelling reasons (such as safety concerns) to recommend supervised or monitored visitation; developing evidence-based protocols and guidelines for moving from supervised to unsupervised visits.
- Including parent coaching and other parenting enhancement supports, such as *Strive*, during visits whenever appropriate and possible.
- Continuing to advocate for including visitation as part of the foster care forecast when developing the state budget each year.

<http://leap.leg.wa.gov/leap/budget/lbns/1517Omni6052-S.SL.pdf>

⁸ Smariga, 2007.

⁹ Barth, Crea et al., 2005; Smariga, 2007.

¹⁰ Hess, P. (2003, October). *Visiting between children in care and their families: A look at current policy*. The national resource center for foster care and permanency planning. Hunter College School of Social Work. Retrieved from http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/visiting_report-10-29-03.pdf Hess, 2003; Mallon & Hess, 2005.

¹¹ Hess, 2003; Mallon & Hess, 2005.

¹² McWey, L., Acock, A., & Porter, B. (2010). *The impact of continued contact with biological parents upon the mental health of children in foster care*. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 1338-1345.

¹³ Haight, Sokolec, Budde, & Poertner, 2001.

¹⁴ Barth, R. P., Landsverk, J., Chamberlain, P., Reid, J. B., Rolls, J. A., Hurlburst, M. S., Farmer, E. M. Z., Kohl, P. L. (2005). *Parent-training programs in child welfare services: Planning for a more evidence-based approach to serving biological parents*. *Social Work Practice*, 15(5), 353-371.

¹⁵ Partners for Our Children. *Open source parenting program*. Summary brief. November, 2014. Retrieve at <http://partnersforourchildren.org/publications/strive-pocspopen-source-parenting-program>