

From Evidence to Practice

Information for practitioners to help improve the lives of children and families

April 2011

Family Visitation in Child Welfare

Helping Children Cope with Separation while in Foster Care



Children who have regular, frequent contact with their family while in foster care have more positive experiences:

- A greater likelihood of reunification
- Shorter stays in out-of-home care
- Overall improved emotional well-being and positive adjustment to placement

Introduction

Family visits may be valuable opportunities for children to heal and cope with the trauma of being separated from their families while in foster care. In fact, regular visitation can help children maintain continuity in family relationships, create a more positive parent-child relationship, and help families prepare to reunite (Weintraub, 2008). Given this, the quality of contact between children in care and their parents over the last 20 years has received much more attention (Triseliotis, 2010).

This focus, however, has not resulted in much evidence-based information on guidelines or standardized tests on what to look for during visits nor criteria for evaluating what happens during visits (Triseliotis, 2010). Given the primary goal of reunification with birth parents, visitation becomes the main vehicle for observing parental behaviors and therefore merits attention. The needs of the child must be at the forefront, while ensuring their safety. Visits between parents and their children can:

- Provide parents with an opportunity to learn new parenting skills, practice new skills and/or demonstrate safe parenting skills.
- Increase the mutual enjoyment for parents and children during their interactions.

- Give the case worker an opportunity to observe and assess families and their progress.
- Support/satisfy reasonable efforts requirements (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997).
- Promote child welfare system goals of safety, child well being and permanency.

Research shows (Weintraub, 2008) that children who have regular, frequent contact with their family while in foster care experience:

- A greater likelihood of reunification
- Shorter stays in out-of-home care
- Increased chances that the reunification will be lasting
- Overall improved emotional well being and positive adjustment to placement

In order to make the most of visits, families need to be prepared for the purpose of visits, what is expected during visits and how visits may change over time in length and frequency. This brief will look at best practices around visitation while children are in foster care. It will look at factors that support visitation as well as challenges. Additionally, ways that the juvenile court system can support parental visitation will be highlighted.

This brief was written for Children’s Administration and Washington State courts to provide a framework for best practice and opportunities to support and improve practice around visitation.

Timely First Visits

When possible, for cases in which visits are advised, the first visit would ideally occur within 48 hours of the initial removal of the child. Early visits after removal can help the child to adjust to their placement. Siblings should be included in as many visits as possible (Wentz, 2008). The first visit after a child has been taken into care should be given special attention and planning so that the visit is successful for both for the child and parent and future visitation is encouraged (Wright, 2001). A parent’s right to visit with his/her child should be based on the parental behavior at the visit, not as a reward or punishment for compliance or lack thereof with other services (Wentz, 2008).

Visitation Plans

Visitation should be part of a larger case plan and strategy for working with a family. It should mesh with the other services that are part of the case plan, such as counseling for the child and/or parents, parenting classes or substance abuse treatment. Services ordered should center around parent-child visits, which provide the opportunity to test the effectiveness of these services and parents can demonstrate an increased ability and willingness to parent (Wright, 2001).

Guiding principles to develop child visitation plans:

1. Child development and parenting skill acquisition are kept in mind and supported.
2. Family culture should be respected and encouraged.
3. Type of abuse will dictate level of supervision needed.
4. Inclusion of siblings as often as possible.
5. Time in care: visits supervision, frequency and length should change as the family makes progress.
6. Other factors to consider: parental mental illness and/or substance abuse, incarceration, domestic violence history.

Levels of Supervision

All cases require that the level of supervision needed during visits be addressed. It should be thought of as a continuum that ensures safety while allowing the most normal family interactions possible (Wentz, 2008).

Factors to consider when determining the level of supervision required:

- Age of child
- Type of abuse the child experienced
- Parent’s history of family violence
- Potential for abduction of child
- Emotional reaction of the child
- Where the visit will occur
- Who will be present at the visit
- Progress parent is making to improve parenting skills
- Parental issues such as addiction and mental illness

Progressive Family Visitation

Visits usually start as supervised with many restrictions on location, activities and frequency. When parents and child are interacting successfully during visits, the plan should change one element of the visit at a time, such as increasing the length of the visit or changing the location (Wentz, 2008). The goal is to slowly increase the parent’s responsibility and move towards unsupervised visits in the parent’s home while safely assessing the parent’s ability.

If there is a failure or repeated problems, go back to the last successful visit plan and determine what will make the visit more successful. Again, change only one element at a time even when there has not been a problem (Wentz, 2008).

Stages of Family Visitation

Family visitation can be thought of as occurring in three stages: preparation and planning, the visit itself, and follow-up (Holcomb, 2004). Each stage of visitation is important to supporting successful visits.

Preparation and Planning

The preparation and planning stage of visitation is when the logistics of the visit are decided and agreed upon. This stage is not only critical to the success of the first visit, it’s critical to the success of future stages (Holcomb, 2004). Case worker observation of family visitation should occur at least monthly.

Good preparation and planning cover the following and should incorporate case goals (Hess, 2003):

- Visitation schedule: dates, times and location of visits
- Who will arrange visit place and time?

- Who will be present?
- What can be expected?
- Arrangements for monitoring, visit coaching, or supervision, if any
- Plan for handling emergency situations
- Procedures for handling problems with visitation
- Visit frequency
- Visit length
- Visit activities
- Transportation arrangements
- Visit do's and don'ts

The Visit

This is the actual time that the parent and child will spend together. It can either be formal or informal. Visits that are either supervised or semi-supervised can provide necessary guidance to help support a positive interaction between parent and child (Holcomb, 2004). The visit supervisor can assist by modeling appropriate interaction while empowering the parent to guide the visit.

Things to keep in mind for the visit:

- Homelike settings work best.
- Psychologically preparing the parents for the visit has been shown to predict a positive experience (Holcomb, 2004).
- Visits should increase and lengthen as a family approaches reunification.
- Parents should be clear on the goal of the visit as it relates to their case plan.
- Help the family create rituals around visits, such as a “hello” and “goodbye” ritual to reduce stress at transition times.

After the Visit

Each visit should be documented by the visit supervisor and reviewed by the case worker. Input should be sought from all parties involved, focusing on successes and challenges of the visit and desires and goals for future visits (Holcomb, 2004). This process can help the worker to refine the visitation plan to reflect obstacles, changes, and parental progress (Wright, 2001). If all is going well, visitation restrictions may be removed and visits lengthened.

Documentation of visits should include the following (Children's Services Practice Notes, 2000):

- Who participated and in what activities.
- The time the parent arrived and the length of the visit.
- Interactions between participants (level of affection).
- Extent to which parent exercised role (setting limits, disciplining child, engagement with child).
- Whether the visit supervisor or case worker needed to intervene.
- How parent and child separated.
- What happened after the visit – both the parent and child's reactions.

Assessing reactions to visitation by participants is important to help them understand and handle their own reactions to visits appropriately (Wright, 2001). All participants – including the parent, child, foster parent and others present – need to be educated about visitation and its emotional impact (Wright, 2001). If the feelings experienced by family members such as anger, sadness and helplessness that are common to reunion and separation cannot be expressed, this will often create behavioral difficulties for the child (Hess & Proch, 1993). It is important for foster parents to understand that behavioral reactions after visits may be expected and do not necessarily signify that visitation should be stopped (Wright, 2001). By carefully evaluating participants' verbal and non-verbal reactions to visits, the case worker can determine whether (and what) changes should be made to the visitation plan (Hess & Proch, 1993).

Visitation Oversight

Ideally, visitation services would be provided by the same agency staff members as those who are providing the reunification services. However, in order to maximize visitation resources, it is likely that others will be involved in the supporting visitation such as foster parents, relatives and volunteers. The case worker therefore may not be present before, during or after many of the visits. In these cases, it is very important that the family's primary case worker maintain responsibility for creating and evaluating the visitation plan (Hess & Proch, 1993). If responsibility for the visitation plan and its implementation becomes diffused, it can lead to missed visits, missed opportunities and delays in reunification (Hess & Proch, 1993).

Factors that Support Visitation

The following have been found to increase the likelihood of visitation by parents (Children's Services Practice Notes, 2000):

- Case worker is committed to visitation.
- Case worker has empathy for parents.
- Foster parents/kin are committed to visitation.
- Agency requires written plans for frequent visits.
- Agency has resources that promote visitation, such as a visitation room with comfortable furniture, age appropriate toys and/or activities for families.

How Social Workers Can Address Challenges to Parents' Participation in Visits

Understanding the common challenges that prevent or discourage parental visitation should be investigated prior to drawing any conclusions about parents' feelings toward their children (Patterns & Outcomes in Child Placement, 1991). When investigating potential barriers to visitation:

1. Build an accurate picture of current levels of visitation across a series of cases: How often have the child and parents actually made contact during the past two months? Has the court set any limitations on contact? Have parents attempted to visit with their children? How did the visits go?
2. Assess agency policy and practice around choice of placement for children: How close are the children placed to their parents' home? Are siblings able to be placed together? What are the standards around the number of children, especially children with special needs who are allowed to be placed in home? Do case workers have manageable caseloads to allow for time to assist with visitation?
3. Understand and investigate financial challenges: Parents involved with the child welfare system are largely those living in poverty. What kind of support do families need to attend visits? Gas vouchers/bus tickets? Child care money for other children? Money for gifts, food, and entertainment during visits?
4. Engage the foster parents: How supportive are they of visitation? Are they a resource to the birth parent? How prepared are they to deal with the emotions of the child once a visit is over? Do they know what to expect?

Problem-solving the barriers with parents can be a valuable way to engage them and to decrease the likelihood that they will get in the way of visitation.

How the Courts Can Support Parents' Participation in Visits

According to Edwards (2003), the juvenile court can also play an important role in supporting family visitation:

- Attorneys representing birth parents should make visitation a major focus of their advocacy efforts.
- The role of the judge is to oversee the delivery and adequacy of reunification services offered to a family, including visitation.

Also according to Edwards (2003), judges have the ability to impact visitation policy by doing the following:

- Meeting with Children's Administration leaders and reminding them of their responsibility to provide meaningful visitation.
- Creating clear, enforceable, and written visitation orders to help set the courts tone around the value of visitation.
- Developing local visitation rules that emphasize the importance of visitation and how visitation will be covered in each hearing.
- Ensuring frequency and duration of visitation meet the needs of the child and parent.
- Providing training on visitation for participants in the juvenile dependency court.
- Using the "no reasonable efforts" finding when the Children's Administration has not complied with reasonable efforts visitation.
- Assisting the Department in being creative with resource allocation that would support visitation.

Conclusion

The primary goals of visitation are to meet the developmental needs of the child and to mitigate the trauma of placement. Additionally, visitation supports familial relationships as well as provides a means for case workers to assess parents' progress toward correcting deficiencies. Given the critical role of visitation in family reunification efforts, more attention should be directed to this important service both by social workers and researchers alike. Additionally, more information on what constitutes quality visitation is needed as well as standardized

ways to evaluate visits and their impact on children. Thoughtful planning should go into visitation plans and should be changed over time as the parents demonstrate change. Birth parents should also be given more support in problem-solving the challenges – both emotional and physical – to participating in visitation. The juvenile court can also play an important role in ensuring that visitation services remain a supported priority in reunification efforts. The importance of connection to family is too important to children to not be a priority, whether the child is able to return home or not.

We'd like to thank the Children's Administration's Everett office for their time and participation in this collaborative effort.

For more information, please contact:

info@partnersforourchildren.org.

Sources

- Children's Services Practice notes: Making the most of visitation. (October 2000). Jordan Institute for Families. Retrieved from http://www.practicenotes.org/vol5_no4/cspn%20v5_4.pdf.
- Edwards, L.P. (2003). Judicial oversight of parental visitation in family reunification cases. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 54(3) 1-62.
- Hess, P. (2003). Visiting between children in care and their families: A look at current policy. National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning. Hunter College School of Social Work, NY.
- Hess, P., & Proch, K. (1993). Visiting: The heart of reunification. In B. Pine, R. Warsh & A. Maluccio (Eds.), *Together again: Family reunification in foster care*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.
- Holcomb, R. (2004). Innovative practice in foster child visitation: A review of the literature for family alternatives, inc. Minneapolis, MN. Retrieved from www.cehd.umn.edu/SSW/cascw/.../FosterCareVisitationLitreview.doc
- Patterns & outcomes in child placement : messages from current research and their implications. (1991). Great Britain Department of Health.
- Triseliotis, J. (2010). Contact between looked after children and their parents: A level playing field? *Adoption & Fostering*, 34(3) 59-66.
- Weintraub, A. (2008). Information packet parent-child visiting. National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning. Hunter College School of Social Work, NY.
- Wentz, R. (2008, October 18) Best Practices in Dependency: Planned, Purposeful, and Progressive Visitation. Podcast retrieved from <http://www.uwvtv.org/programs/displayevent.aspx?rID=27405>.
- Wright, L.E. (2001). *Toolbox No. 1: Using Visitation to Support Permanency*. Toolboxes for Permanency. CWLA Press, Washington, DC.