



Family Time Visitation in the Child Welfare System

Summary:

Current research shows consistent and frequent visitation between parents and their children in out-of-home care can reduce trauma for children (Smariga, 2007; Mallon & Hess, 2005; Haight, Kagle & Black, 2003). Visitation is crucial to strengthening and maintaining family relationships – it’s also important for parent-child attachments and can decrease the sense of abandonment that children often experience when they are removed from their home and placed into out-of-home care. Family visitation 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 (Mallon & Hess, 2005; Hess, 2003).

Background

On April 1, 2014, there were approximately 8,700 children in out-of-home care in Washington State (Children’s Administration, 2014). Children who are removed from their home due to neglect and/or abuse, and placed in out-of-home care, often experience emotional trauma (Smariga, 2007). Many children are overwhelmed with feelings, such as anger, nervousness, sadness, or fear. Separation anxiety is a common response, especially among younger children who have no ability to understand the reason for separation, and do not have the coping skills to deal with long periods of uncertainty (Barth, Crea et al., 2005; Smariga, 2007). As a result, children can feel hurt or rejected; and may believe their parents do not want to see them anymore.

In the past, Washington State had no consistent policy or guidance on family time visitation. In 2003, the state passed a bill to maintain sibling relationships for dependent children (ESSB 5779). A year later, another bill 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 the 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 their health, safety and overall well-being. Visitation cannot be limited as a sanction for a parent’s failure to comply with court orders.

Research Findings

Faster Reunification and Shorter Stays in Out-of-Home Care. Research shows that consistent and frequent family time visitation is a best practice for families in dependency cases (Hess, 2003; Mallon & Hess, 2005). 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 are strengthened. This helps prepare families for the transition from out-of-home care to returning home, and increases the likelihood of lasting reunification.

Research also shows a positive correlation between parent-child visitation and children’s well-being while in placement care (Hess, 2003; Mallon & Hess, 2005). Children who frequently visit with their parents are more likely to have higher well-being ratings and adjust well to placement than children less frequently or never visited. In addition, children who have frequent contact with their parents have lower levels of depression and “acting out” behavior (McWey, Acock, & Porter, 2010).

Impact on Children 0-5 years old. There is evidence that the parent-child relationship plays a critical role in early childhood development (Haight, Kagle & Black, 2003; Smariga, 2007). Biological and developmental research finds that when there is a significant absence of contact with the primary caregiver, children under five years will have impaired brain formation and development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012). These early relationships are the basis of a strong neurological foundation necessary for the brain to form. The interactions and sensory cues infants receive from a parent or guardian, such as facial expressions, touching, talking or other sounds, build a healthy brain structure. If this is missing, cognitive delays can occur, impacting academic performance, behavior and mental health later in life.

Frequency and Duration of Visitation is Important.

There are many best practices established for parent-child visitation. Two key areas that are very straightforward include the frequency and duration of these visits when the goal is to reunify children with their parents. According to a few best practice guides that are based on research, there are different frequency and duration goals for different age groups, including:

- Birth – 5 years old, at least 1 hour a day, 5 days a

week (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012).

- School-aged, at least 1 hour a day, 2-3 days a week (Visitation/Access Guide, 2005).
- Teenage, 30 minutes - 1 hour a day, weekly (Visitation/Access Guide, 2005).

Enhancing Visitation: STRIVE, an Open Source Parenting Program. It is common for parents involved in the child welfare system to attend a parenting program, either voluntary or court-mandated (Barth, Landsverk et al., 2005). The purpose of many parent-education programs is to improve parenting skills and capabilities, increase child safety, and reduce future risk of child maltreatment.

Partners for Our Children is currently developing STRIVE, an evidence-informed open source parenting program specifically designed to meet the needs of families involved in the child welfare system (Partners for Our Children, 2014). The goal of this program is to engage and prepare parents for visitation, promote child safety, teach positive parenting techniques, and prepare parents and their children to be reunited. STRIVE uses a strengths-based approach to improve parenting skills and to enhance the parent-child relationship. During each visit, parents are taught a specific parenting technique and they immediately use that technique during visitation with their child. After each visit, parents debrief with the coach on what they learned. This approach allows for assessment and monitoring to determine if the parent is improving their parenting skills, and hopefully can move to having unsupervised visits with their 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 in a therapeutic focus is important (Haight, Sokolec, Budde, & Poertner, 2001). Pairing visitation with a parenting program could also be more cost effective – these are often two requirements that parents must complete before their children can return home. It would be efficient to take care of both requirements in one visit. In addition, research shows that pairing visitation with a parenting program is also an effective way to increase reunification (Barth, Landsverk et al., 2005).

Recommendations

The Children's Administration is struggling with growing demands on their visitation resources. Increases in the frequency and cost of court-ordered supervised visitation has sparked a dialogue among agency staff, policy makers and stakeholders regarding current visitation policies and practices. Yet, data about the frequency, type and effectiveness of visitation practices is very limited. Most visits are supervised by contracted providers who cannot input information directly into the statewide child welfare data system. Also, there is significant variation across providers and courts regarding visitation expectations and procedures.

Since parent child visitation is a critical component of successful reunification and resources for transportation and supervision are limited, we offer the following

recommendations:

1. Include a visitation forecast as part of the budget development process each year. Since the number of children in foster care is now in the budget forecast, it should be possible to estimate the proportion of children who will be visiting with their parents in each budget year.
2. Build an automated tracking system. In the future, supervised visits will be managed statewide by network administrators as a result of HB 2264 (performance-based contracting). This provides an opportunity to develop an application which will request and compile critical information about the frequency and quality of supervised visits.
3. Develop guidelines for which families require supervised visitation and which do not. The effort should also include training for judges and social workers on the best use of supervised visitation.
4. Supervised visits should include efforts to improve parenting and strategies to engage parents whenever possible.

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Information

More information on child welfare in Washington State can be found on our website, www.partnersforourchildren.org.

Please send your questions to:

info@partnersforourchildren.org