

# VISITATION / FAMILY ACCESS GUIDE



**A Best Practice Model for Social Workers and Agencies**

Ohio Caseload Analysis Initiative in partnership with ProtectOhio Initiative  
2005



## Foreword

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In most families, children attach to their parents or caregivers through emotional bonds. Such attachment is basic to a child's life, providing a secure emotional base for the child to build relationships later in life.

So essential is this attachment to a child's well-being, that children who are in out-of-home care must have access to their parents/caregivers, siblings and other important people in their lives. Throughout the guide, the term parent(s) but can also refer to the child's primary caregiver, legal guardian, and birth parent.

These guidelines include visitation and contact for children who are placed in out-of-home care. The terms (1) "visitation", (2) "parenting time", and (3) "family access" are used throughout these guidelines to describe parent-child, kin, siblings and other relative contacts. Visits and parenting time are defined as face-to-face contact between the child and their parent and the child and their siblings. Family access may involve kin, relatives, and other important people in the child's life. Other forms of contact would include telephone calls, letters, and exchange of gifts, videos, and photographs between family members and significant others.

The following guidelines are not intended to serve as a rigid blueprint for practice nor are they intended to establish a legal standard to which professionals must adhere, unless the action described is required by State or Federal statute or rule. Rather, the guidelines provide a model of best practice *professional practice*. The primary audience for this practice model is our Child and Family Services staff and community partners.

The Ohio Caseload Analysis (CLA) Initiative initiated the development of this guide as part of the Concurrent Planning model CLA was developing in 2004-2005. CLA which began in Ohio in May 1998, consist today of the following counties, Athens, Coshocton, Guernsey, Logan and Tuscarawas. With major support from the Ohio Department of Jobs Family Services, CLA set out to develop an initiative that would (1) develop and document a best-practice approach for child protection; (2) implement this approach across a range of counties; (3) prove the success of the initiative by measuring its effectiveness; (4) continuously improve its approach; and (5) develop and document a framework and approach for implementation that other counties and states could follow.

Ohio Caseload Analysis is defined as: *a model that has been tested and refined by the counties since 1998. It represents a comprehensive methodology to drive safety and permanence in child protection services and to support consistent, systematic delivery of family-centered, strength-based services. It includes innovative practice technologies which encompass family assessment and service planning, while striving for a balance between workload and available hours. It emphasizes Organization Development to build readiness and maintain a strong foundation - with an emphasis on sound fiscal management, data-driven decision making, collaboration with community resources and continuous improvement in both practice and outcomes.*

The CLA Counties felt strongly that CLA should be a model that would be developed and implemented by directors and supervisors. The model has been created to allow an agency to change practice from the top-down with an emphasis on process management and continuous improvement. By taking this approach, CLA allows agency leaders to take an overall inventory on practice; how the agency serves its "customers" at all levels, and assess how family-centered and strength-based the agency is practicing. Then by implementing the CLA model, tools and measures, the agency could enhance management skills to positively impact the day-to-day practice of its workers and the services children and families receive.

In 2004, CLA Implementation Leadership Forum charged a workgroup to develop a comprehensive Concurrent Planning model. CLA has defined Concurrent Planning's purpose as to *expedite permanence for children*. It fosters appropriate attachment, relationship building and *continuity* between child, family and alternative family. While developing the model, it became apparent that a special subcommittee needed to be formed to develop a best practice guide for visitation and family access. Increased visitation with a purpose is a guiding principle of Concurrent Planning but also for good child welfare practice in general.

Concurrent Planning relates and incorporates all of the developed CLA tools (for example, Genogram, Ecomap, Family Group Conference, Kinship). Concurrent Planning is also a key initiative for the State of Ohio

as it's is part of ODJFS' Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), the response to the federal Child and Family Services Review. Concurrent Planning can be found under Permanency Outcome P1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situation. The goal is in two years Ohio will increase the percentage rate of finalized adoptions from 25.7% to 28.6%.

Visitation and continuity of family connections is also a part of the ODJFS' PIP. It can be found under Permanency Outcome P2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children. The goal is to increase worker's skills in working with families whose children are in foster care placement so they will be able to preserve primary connections of the child while the child is in foster care placement. The proposed plan to reach the goal is to provide training to local children services agencies to encourage workers to:

- Explore visitation and placement with non-custodial parents (particularly fathers), unless it is not in the child's best interests;
- Consider utilizing family group decision-making to engage parents and others in addressing the needs of children and allow children to remain in their own homes or be safely reunified;
- Include how agencies are effectively working with non-custodial fathers and extended relatives to assure that connections are preserved; and
- Incorporate into Child Protection Oversight Evaluation (CPOE) case record review instrument monitoring the preservation of connections and relative placements.

We believe the Visitation and Family Assess Guide along with CLA Concurrent Planning Model could assist the state in reaching its PIP plans as well as allow local children services to put specific steps into place to integrate these programs as well as meet their own local goals.

Many individuals contributed to the development of this Guide. Their time and suggestions are greatly appreciated. The CLA Visitation Subcommittee consisted of representatives from CLA counties: *Laura Somers (Athens County)*, *Kelly Lynch (Guernsey County)*, *Tom Broadwater (Guernsey County)*, *Jennifer Meyer (Logan)*, and *Emily Pool (Logan County)*.

ProtectOhio, an initiative of fourteen Ohio children services agencies receiving a broad, comprehensive waiver of Title IV-E Foster Care Maintenance Funds must identify specific strategies to improve child welfare outcomes utilizing the flexible funding. One specific strategy for 2005 is Structured Visitation. CLA invited ProtectOhio counties to join the Visitation Subcommittee and together develop a strong guide. The CLA Visitation Subcommittee consisted of representatives from the ProtectOhio Counties: *Bonnie Sawruk, (Ashtabula)*, *Jennifer Coey (Clark)*, *Teresa Kiley (Clark)*, *Nikki Harless (Richland)*, *Vicky Graves (Richland)*, *Joanne Shankel (Stark)*.

Special thanks go to Zoë Breen Wood, Instructor and Director of Field Education at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Case Western Reserve University for co-chairing the Subcommittee and contributing to the development of this guide; and to Norma Ginther with the Institute for Human Services for providing expertise and representing the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program's CORE training on attachment, visitation, cultural diversity and other such topics.

Finally, while researching literature and other sources to support our charge, we discovered Olmstead County (Minnesota) Child and Family Services Division had already developed a guide similar to what we wanted to produce for Ohio. By obtaining permission from this organization, we were able to incorporate much of their guide along with some additions and revisions to adapt to Ohio and complete our vision of the guide. We acknowledge the hard work Olmstead County undertook to develop such a comprehensive guide and give thanks for allowing our group to make modifications to the guide.

We offer this guide as an opportunity for agencies and staff to enhance their practice with children and families.

Angela Sausser Short, CLA Project Manager & Visitation Co-Chair  
[saussershort@aol.com](mailto:saussershort@aol.com)



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## The Importance of Family Visiting

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Visiting and family access are opportunities for growth and learning. There is no expectation of perfection. In addition, visitation allows for the following:

- establishing and strengthening the parent-child relationship;
- helping parents become involved in the child's school, church or community activities;
- helping parents gain confidence in looking after their child and meeting their child's needs;
- helping to identify and assess potentially stressful situations between parents and their children; and,
- assisting in evaluating the family's progress towards their goals.

**"The primary purpose of visiting is to allow children to preserve relationships with people who are important to them"** (Hess and Proch, 1988, p.2).

**Visiting is the *primary* casework intervention for maintaining and supporting adequate parent-child relationships necessary for successful reunification (Haight, 2001).**

**The *frequency* of visits has been found to be a key variable in predicting the likelihood of successful reunification (Warsh & Pine, 2000).**

### Overall Benefits of Visitation

Without visitation, the parent/child relationship can deteriorate. Both parent and child become emotionally detached. Once this has occurred, successful reunification is extremely difficult.

- Frequent contact can reduce the negative effects of separation for children.
- Seeing the parent during visits and other contacts reduces the child's fantasies and fears of "bad things" happening to their parent, and can often help older children eliminate self-blame for the placement.
- Visits and contacts communicate the agency's belief that the family is important to the child, and to the worker, which further supports family involvement and timely reunification. Casework activities during visits reinforce the provision of services to the family as a unit, which further strengthens the family system, including the child while in placement.

### Children in PPLA

For children who are in a planned permanent living arrangement (PPLA), visitation provides a number of benefits and especially for children who are about to age out or who are likely to return to their biological family. These benefits include:

- trying to re-establish a relationship with their family;
- understanding the safety and risk factors that may still exist;
- understanding their parents' or caregivers' capacity for change can be accomplished through visitation;
- gives children the opportunity to develop skills to recognize threats to their safety, protect themselves, and monitor their own emotions, reactions and behaviors as they near adulthood; and,
- helps a child recognize his or her own needs versus the family's needs and to help a child recognize his or her feelings of loyalty and obligations to that family.



## Children in Permanent Custody with the Goal of Adoption

Benefits of visiting for children with the permanency goal of adoption include (Hess, 2003, p.3):

- to offer an opportunity for a child and parent(s) to say goodbye to each other, recognizing that a child may eventually reconnect with his or her biological family;
- for the parent to accept, demonstrate and/or communicate responsibility for the behavior that is preventing the child from being returned to his or her home; and,
- for the parent to send the child a supportive message to move on to a new permanent family.

## Values of Visitation

The use of visitation as a tool for reunification depends on whether the agency and workers hold the following values.

- Visitation builds upon existing relationships.
- It honors an existing bond while providing a safe environment in which to build upon the parent-child attachment.
- Visitation provides family continuity.
- It respects parents for what they can already do.
- Visitation should be planful and purposeful with a productive outcome.
- Visitation should be least intrusive and more "home-like" and should be based upon safety and risk; increasing contact until it reflects a "normal" lifestyle.

- The emotions of the parent and child, which underlie the visitation process, are recognized and attended to in a respectful and thoughtful manner by agency workers.
- Recognition that visitation should have a progressive element towards permanency for the child and family.
- Utilization of a visitation plan that is family-driven and individualized.
- Visitation plans should respect a family's culture and rituals.
- Visitation plans should empower parents to participate in their child's everyday activities and when possible, be allowed to assist in making decisions that affect their child's everyday life.
- Visitation is an opportunity to create a linkage between the present and the past while acknowledging the strengths a parent may have in raising their child.
- Visitation and family contact should never be used as a reward or punishment but considered a right of families and children.





## Three Phases of Visiting

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It is important for workers to view visitation as a process rather than a stagnant activity for serving families. There are three phases of visiting: initial phase, middle phase, and transition phase. Different purposes are emphasized in each phase but the most important purpose though all phases is to preserve and enhance family connections, ultimately providing safety and well-being for the child. The timelines under each phase is offered as a guideline for addressing key stages but should not dictate the family's ability to move forward. Each family's circumstances are unique and needs to be addressed individually.

### Initial Phase

#### A. Characteristics

1. Builds a relationship among family, foster family and worker.
2. Focuses on assessment and goal planning.
3. Generally can last four to eight weeks, but needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis.
4. Family members are often uncomfortable with each other.
5. Children are sometimes pressured (internally by parents or other family members) to recant their allegations of maltreatment.
6. Visits typically need to be closely supervised/monitored and controlled for location and length.
7. If supervised, the role of the supervisor is to provide assessment, modeling and planning.
8. Levels of supervision fade in and out, drop off and pick up, in next room or on property.

#### B. Worker's Considerations Regarding Relationships and Interactions

1. How can visits be structured in a way that promotes the child's and family's trust in the worker and foster parents?
2. How can visits be structured to provide maximum family/child interaction?
3. How frequently does this child need parental contact to sustain the relationship?
4. Who does the child define as family?
5. What relationships are important to maintain or build through visits?
6. What arrangements will minimize stress and conflict among family members during visits?
7. Has there been any past history of parents being threatening or harmful to child staff or others during visits?
8. How team will deal with parents making promises that can't or won't happen? If overheard, stop and clarify issues; if not heard, set up meeting to confront the behavior, pull self out of self-defeating role, don't get into control issues.
9. How can visit time be used to clarify to all parties the reasons for placement?
10. How can visits be used to support family's cultural and ethnic style?

#### C. Purpose

1. Conduct assessments, including parents' ability to provide for child's safety.
2. Mediate and problem solve.

3. Demonstrate the strengths, resources and potentiality of the parents and the child that can make reunion possible.
4. Identify additional family problems that may impede reunification.
5. Provide modeling and healthy parenting practices.
6. Facilitate goal planning related to visits and family access.
7. Involvement of the parent and the child in assessment and goal planning.

## **Middle Phase**

### **A. Characteristics**

1. Family members and others work to meet case goals.
2. Visit activities are chosen to provide ways to learn and practice new patterns of behavior.
3. Agency collaborates with other service providers to deliver needed resources.
4. Feasibility, level and timing or reunification is further assessed.
5. Consideration is given to whether changes in arrangements or supports could be made to promote goal attainment.
6. Visits typically occur more often, for longer periods, with gradually diminishing supervision.
7. Responsibility for the child shifts from the agency to the parents.
8. Usually extends over several months.

### **B. Safety Considerations**

1. Is the child safe without supervision?
2. Is the child safe on an overnight visit?

### **C. Worker's Consideration Regarding Relationships and Interaction**

1. Are visits providing activities for parents to attend to the child's developmental needs?
2. How can visits facilitate parents' involvement in child's daily care and special events?
3. Have there been positive changes in the child or parents' requests to be understood and responded to for continued attachments?

### **D. Purpose**

1. Provide a forum for parents to demonstrate new skills, including modeling, assessing continuum, and building attachment.
2. To continue to practice and learn new behaviors and responses to child's behaviors.
3. Facilitate progress towards case plan goals pertaining to visitation.
4. To continue to assess ways in which visit activities change to reflect the family's progress or needs.
5. To assess what the child's and parent's reactions to visits are thus far to determine family's potential for reunification.
6. To determine if there is a need to revise the worker's and foster parent's role in the visit process.
7. To planfully shift parental responsibility back to the parent.

8. To assist parents in beginning to utilize and maximize community resources, family network, and other service providers for their own support.

## Transition Phase

### A. Characteristics

1. Occurs when the decision has been made to reunify or seek permanency with an alternative family.
2. Visits should provide maximum opportunity for parent-child interaction and contact.
3. Need for evaluation of remaining stress points.

### B. Purpose

1. Structure visits to prevent premature reunification.
2. Ongoing assessment of family relationships.
3. Structure visits to identify and address remaining stress points in the relationships.
4. Structure visits so that upon evaluation, it is clear to both the worker and the family that reunification is definite.
5. If reunification with the birth family is not possible, decisions must be made about custody to relatives, adoption, or alternative permanent living arrangement.
6. If reunification is not occurring, there should be role transition and/or good-bye visit (Haight, 2001).





## Who May Participate In Visits

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The comprehensive family assessment should identify individuals with whom the child has established and significant relationships. These relationships are considered significant because their loss could cause substantial harm to the child and preserving them is in the best interest of the child. These can include parents, grandparents, siblings, other relatives or adults in a surrogate parental role, and former foster caregivers.



A genogram may be a helpful tool in identifying potential visitors and taps the family's expertise in this area. In the case of children in care who may or may not be available for adoption, visitation or parenting time with adoptive parents or others who are going to be important in the child's life may also be part of the plan.

The court may specify who may or may not visit. In most cases, parental and sibling visits have priority. When expectations as to who should be included in visits differ, the child's and the parents' preferences should be given priority over those of substitute caregivers or extended family members. If significant differences of opinion exist between the family and caseworker regarding who should be included in visits, supervisory or group consultation should be sought to determine if the requested visitation is consistent with the best interest of the child.



## The Importance of Involving Fathers

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Best practice indicates that fathers should have the opportunity to take a more active role in raising their children. Involving fathers in a structured visitation plan can provide a unique opportunity. It allows fathers to develop their parenting skills and an agency to assess a father's ability to parent their child(ren).

Fathers can have a significant impact on the lives of their children and when appropriate should receive equal consideration as to the type and amount of visits they receive with their child(ren).

However, barriers exist that can keep workers from actively involving fathers.

- The father has had limited or no involvement in their child's life.
- Workers generally focus services on reunifying with the mother (especially if the parents are separated, divorced or had never been married).
- Fathers generally do not respond to outreach efforts as well as mothers.
- Fathers are generally not the primary caregiver of their child(ren).
- Mothers may be resistant to a father's involvement in their child(ren)'s life.
- Fathers may have significant issues that impair their abilities for becoming primary caretakers.

### Tips for Involving Fathers

Once paternity is established, there are a number of methods a worker can use to engage a father and to increase their involvement while providing the worker an opportunity to assess a father's capacity to parent their child(ren):

- ☆ Workers should discuss with the father, the importance of their involvement in their child's life. This should also be discussed with other members of the case (e.g., other relatives, the child) even if the mother is resistant to paternal involvement.
- ☆ Ensure that services surrounding visitation (and other contacts) are appropriate and support the father's understanding of the child's developmental needs.
- ☆ Workers should make face-to-face contact with a father to discuss how visits are progressing, discuss any difficulties or questions they may have, and to lend general support to the fact that they are providing care and nurturance to their children. Something they may be doing for the first time.
- ☆ Workers should keep fathers equally informed of appointments and activities that their child(ren) may be involved in and encourage attendance to these activities.
- ☆ Foster parents should take an active role in assisting fathers by discussing their child with them and when appropriate, involving them in decisions that affect their child.

- ☆ Allow visitation for fathers in accordance with agency visitation policies regardless of what the schedule may be for the mother. Each parent should be allowed to visit equally unless there are circumstances that would indicate otherwise.
- ☆ Encourage positive interaction between father and child and refer to joint counseling if appropriate. This will allow the child and father to process issues of separation and provide additional positive interaction.
- ☆ Ensure that the child is including the father and paternal family in life book development. Workers may want to have the father work on the life book with the child, sharing information, taking pictures during visits and working on pages together.
- ☆ For fathers that are incarcerated, the worker should check with the correctional facility to find out what their visitation policies are for children. Fathers and their children may be able to have other contacts such as letters or phone calls (for more information, refer to the section *Location of Visits*, p.18).
- ☆ Workers should advise the courts of a father's continued progress. If child support has not been ordered, a worker can request that the court establish a support order.
- ☆ Look into fatherhood programs across the state and within your local area.
- ☆ In the event that a father is determined to be legitimately unavailable and a search has been completed, paternal relatives are to be considered for placement and/or involvement in the child(ren)'s life (refer to Appendix A, Tip Sheet for Involving Fathers, Kentucky Visitation Materials).





## Frequency of Visits

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### Frequency Between Parents and Their Child

Visiting helps to maintain and develop children's attachment bonds with their parent. Development and/or continuation of the attachment bond is determined by a number of factors:

- persistent;
- enduring;
- linked to a specific person (not interchangeable with anyone else);
- emotionally significant;
- child must maintain proximity to or contact with the significant person; and,
- child must pursue security and comfort in the relationship.

To ensure safety and security, close proximity to the attachment figure is the goal of attachment seeking behaviors in very young children. Infants and toddlers use physical contact with the attachment figure as their secure base. Thus, infants and toddlers benefit from daily visitation or at the very least visitation every two or three days. Because physical proximity is the goal of the attachment system for infants and toddlers, visitation schedules involving longer periods of time between visits are not advisable.

For school aged children the availability of the attachment figure, rather than physical proximity, is the goal of the attachment system. Secure attachment continues to rely on a child's confidence in their primary caregivers as available, responsive and protective caregivers. School aged children can endure slightly longer periods of separation than infants because their need is for the caregiver to be available rather than in close physical proximity. Use of supplementary strategies such as telephone and email contact can assist with the obtainment of availability and frequency. School aged children, however, still benefit from face-to-face contact of two or three times per week (Bowlby, J., 1969; Kelly, J.B. & Lamb, M.E., 2000).

#### **What is Attachment? What is Bonding?**

**Bonding refers to what happens between an infant and caregiver during a relatively short period of time -the warm, close feelings a parent experiences in the first hours and days of the infant's life. Bonding is basically one sided-the parent's experience with her/his new infant.**

**In contrast, attachment is a mutual, reciprocal relationship in which the child is an active, knowing partner. It is a relationship that develops gradually during the early months and years of a child's life (Farrell Erickson, 1998. p. 6).**

## Frequency of Visits Between Child and Siblings

It is necessary to keep in mind the needs of the child in the context of their sibling relationships. Visits between siblings in foster care should be frequent and correlate with children's ages, development and nature of their sibling relationship. Sibling visit may be achieved concurrently, with visits that occur between the children and their parent(s). However, sibling visitation should not be reliant on successful implementation of visits between parent(s) and children. Special effort to plan for visits between siblings, distinct from visits between children and parents, may be necessary in some cases, such as:

- assigning one social worker for the sibling group;
- securing a placement in the home neighborhood or school district;
- scheduling regular and frequent visits among siblings;
- engaging the family, including children, in the development of written visitation plans;
- educating foster and adoptive parents on the importance of sibling relationships and how to actively facilitate a sibling relationship by helping to maintain contact;
- scheduling joint therapy sessions;
- encouraging shared vacations;
- promoting sharing of childcare providers/babysitters;
- scheduling activities together, including special events and cultural celebrations;
- using video conferencing when distance creates a barrier for face-to-face visits;
- providing current photos of brothers and sisters to each child;
- having siblings do life books together;
- acknowledging and celebrating each sibling's birthday;
- actively encouraging family access during worker visits; and,
- providing flexible visitation locations and schedules.

### Importance of Frequent Parenting Time

**If an attachment bond is to be maintained between parents and their children in out-of-home care... a once a month visitation time frame is not advised. Because physical proximity is the key goal of the attachment system for infants and toddlers, and availability if the goal for other children, how could children of any age possible maintain an affectional or attachment bond with a parent he or she visits every 30 days with no other contact? (Kuehnle and Ellis, 2002, p.69)**

## How Soon After Placement Children, Parents, and Siblings Should Visit

It is important for children, parents, and siblings to have access to each other as soon after placement occurs, and as frequently as possible, thereafter. No specific requirements around the timing of these events were discovered during the research for this Guide, but the following are recommendations.

- Scheduling regular and frequent visits between the child and the parent is critical.

- The first visit should occur within 48 hours of placement.
- For most children, it is recommended that visits with their parents occur at a minimum of two or three times a week.
- Additional contacts may include telephone calls or parental attendance with the child at routine activities such as counseling sessions, medical appointment, or school events.
- For infants and preschool children, several visits a week will be necessary to [establish or] maintain the parent-child relationship.
- In general, visits will increase in frequency during the transition to reunification.
- Daily visits between infants and parents have been achieved in some situations.
- Visits between the child and siblings or other significant adults should be held during the first week of placement.
- During the period immediately after the removal, the parent's continuing involvement should be supported and maintained.





## Intensity and Duration of Visits

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### Intensity of Visits

Another important component of a successful visitation program is the arranging of visits along a continuum of increasingly stressful situations in order to assist the parent in developing increasing confidence and competence in parenting. An example might be to begin with visits at play times when the children are well rested and move along to increasingly difficult times such as bedtime. This gives parents a chance to develop their skills in areas such as limit-setting, teaching children right from wrong and effective discipline approaches.

Children should only return home after they had safe, unsupervised visits lasting several days or more over an appropriate period of time (Warsh, R. & Pine, B., 2000.; Warsh, R. Pin, B.A. & Maluccio, A.N., 1996).

### Duration of Visits

The visit should be of adequate duration to maintain the parent/child relationship. In general, one to four hours is an appropriate time range. Initial visits of short duration, one to two hours, allow parents to experience small successes. For some teenagers, a structured visit of 30-45 minutes may be appropriate.

Visitation between the child and his/her family increases in frequency and duration as the goal of reuniting the family is approached. Successful unsupervised day long, overnight and weekend visits are completed prior to planning for the return home. Overnight visits can be considered when it is assured that the child can be protected in the home.

When parents and children do not know each other well, do not like each other, or have an ambivalent relationship, visits should be planned with sufficient flexibility to allow an uncomfortable visit to end early or a good time to last longer (Hess and Proch, 1988, p.46).





## Location of Visits

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Generally, visits should be planned for the least restrictive, most normal environment and include activities that can assure the safety of the child. There are many options for where visits could take place with each location having its advantages and disadvantages. At times, it may be useful to change the location of the visit while keeping in mind the need for children to have some consistency and regularity.

### Visits in the Child's Home

Hess & Proch (1993) state that the preferred setting for visits is in the child's home, unless this is precluded for safety reasons. The Council on Accreditation (COA) for Children and Family Services states children have a right to visit their parents in their family's home. Having the visits within the child's home has definite advantages, such as the environment is quite familiar to the child and can assist with his feelings of what was left behind. The child returns to his belongings, toys, his own rooms, pictures, etc. It should be noted that the first few visits in the home can cause the child much confusion when it is time for the child to leave again and return to his/her foster home. Having the visit in the home allows the parent and child to be in their own natural setting to practice and demonstrate parenting skills. This is especially important if reunification is the goal and if all goes well will occur as the parent will need to provide adequate care and parenting in this setting when the child returns. This location should be considered for all phases of visiting, but especially for the transition phase if the transition is reunification.

Of course, if safety is a concern for the child or visit supervisor, this cannot be an option. Safety issues can be based on specific parental behaviors (e.g., parent is still drinking) or from environmental sources (e.g., drugs are often in the home).

### Visits in the Foster Home

Another option for visits could be the child's foster home. This option needs to be clearly discussed and accepted by the child's foster parents. Success for this option will rely on how the agency has defined the foster parent's role, supported the foster parents with developing a relationship with the child's family, and if policy states foster parents must agree to visits within the home. Visiting in the foster home is consistent to how many foster parents see themselves as mentors to the child's family, willing to assist and work with the child's family toward reunification. Based on experience and the child's family, many foster parents may see this as a viable option. Others may require additional training, encouragement and support as they begin looking at visits within their home as a feasible option (for more information, refer to the section *Building Relationships Between Birth Parents and Foster Parents*, p.49).

### Visits in the Agency's Visiting Room

At times a neutral setting, such as a room at the children protective services agency, may be the viable option. Having a visit at the agency or another neutral setting allows the agency to prepare for and have available security protection and control if safety is an

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issue. Although the visit is occurring in a neutral location, the location should put effort in make the room as family-friendly and comfortable as possible with age appropriate visiting activities (e.g., toys, art projects, books, etc) readily available. By having the visitation room be well equipped, the parent can be guided on how to play appropriately with their child as well as perform various caregiving activities (e.g., cooking, bathing and changing an infant). If the room has a one-way mirror, observers can be unobtrusive and still observe the interaction between the child and his/her parent(s).

### **Visits in the Visitation Center**

Visitation Centers are often used when safety is a definite concern. Visitation centers are specifically created and staffed to offer onsite supervision during visits as well as provide a range of support to the visiting party. Visitation Centers should also be made as family-friendly and comfortable as possible with a range of age appropriate visiting activities. Having a safe, secure and neutral setting can impact whether visits will continue or be terminated.

### **Visits in the Child's Community**

There may be options in the child's community that could be utilized for visits that are meaningful and familiar to the child (and his/her parents) and allow for meeting the goals of visitation. Such options could include, visits in a relative's home, restaurant, park or other locations the child is familiar with and feels safe.

### **Contacts During Professional Appointments / Family Access**

Beside specific and required visits, the family could take the child along for everyday activities, such as grocery shopping or a trip to the neighborhood laundry mat. By visiting and spending time together allows the child to stay connected to familiar people, places and that that can reassure the child and support his sense of belonging. The parent may also accompany the child to professional appointments, such as medical, school, therapy. It is helpful for the parent to be a part of these appointments and other activities as it reinforces the parent's continued involvement and responsibility for the child, is kept up-to-date with the child's developmental progress and allows the parent to "practice" activities that may continue when the child is returned home.

### **Visiting in Specific Situations**

#### **Parent Incarcerated**

Case planning with an incarcerated parent whose child is in foster care, includes arranging and providing visitation/parental involvement if appropriate. Visitation may be discontinued only when the court sanctions this step (Hess, 2003, p15).

Hess and Proch (1988) have this to say about visiting in this circumstance:

**“Children are sometimes placed when a custodial parent is incarcerated and arrangements with other appropriate caregivers, such as extended family members, cannot be made. When a parent’s incarceration is related to having harmed the child, the impact of contact with the parent on the child should be assessed. When a child is placed due to the parent’s incarceration and family reunification is the goal, every effort should be made to assure regular visiting. The child’s fantasy of the parent’s experience in prison may be much more frightening than the reality, and visits can reassure the child that the parent is alive and safe.**

**In planning visits between children and incarcerated parents, it is essential to determine in advance what is required to secure permission for the child to visit, who can accompany the child to visits, and how often and for how long the child can visit. So that [caseworkers] can appropriately prepare the child, determine whether a child will be able to hug or kiss a parent or will be required to visit through a glass window and what rules govern visit behaviors,**

**[Caseworkers] are asked to examine their own attitudes about the child’s visiting in prison. If they are uncomfortable with this plan, they may be depriving families of their right to contact by delaying the scheduling of visits” (pp. 40-41).**

The planning described above will alert the social worker to whether or not children are even allowed to visit their parents in a locked facility. However, some circumstances may allow children to have access with approval for physical parent-child contact.

The caseworker and foster parents should take time to properly prepare the child(ren) for visits with the incarcerated parent of what to expect during the visit.

### **Parent Institutionalized**

Special care and attention is also needed when planning for parenting time between children and parents who are in specialized care settings such as a mental health or chemical dependency treatment facility.

The caseworker should “encourage parent(s) to correspond with [the] agency and their child whenever possible and appropriate, arrange/provide visitation if appropriate, and assist in the parent’s continued contact correspondence...with the child.” (Hess, 2003, p. 15).

It's important to talk with parents about responding to children when they don't want to have visits with their parent. Its possible parents may think it's best to say to the child that they don't have to go. Caseworkers can emphasize the importance of visits and also help work through the child's concerns. Children may be able to overcome their initial reluctance to visit when they have an active role in deciding what they want the visit to look like (who participates, where in the facility does the visit take place, how to signal when the child wants the visit to end, etc.). Depending on the age of the child, questions such as, "What have you heard about this place?", "What do you think this is going to be like?", or statements like, "This is a place of healing. Even though Mom might look sad, she's in a safe place," may be reassuring and helpful in engaging children in preparing for visits.

Preparing parents living in a specialized care setting for parenting time with their children is another essential step in the planning process. Caseworkers can offer additional support by talking with the parent about how they think they are going to react to seeing their child(ren). If the parent is not ready for visits shortly after admission into the care facility, it is important for the caseworker to discuss with personnel how those involved will know when mom or dad is ready to reconnect in person with their child. This will allow the caseworker to have something to share with the children who are eager to know when their first visit may be possible.

In cases where a parent may be able to leave the care setting for a period of time, the caseworker may consider bringing the parent to the community where the child lives for parenting time rather than having the children go to facility.

The caseworker and foster parents should take time to properly prepare the child(ren) for visits with the institutionalized parent of what to expect during the visit.





## Quality of Visits

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Certain components of visitation such as legal requirements are easy to describe and research. The concept of “quality” of visits is highly valued and even evaluated during internal and external case reviews. Quality is associated with excellence. However, there is limited guidance available on this aspect of visitation and family access. We know that frequency and consistency of visits can impact the quality of visits. What follows is an attempt to introduce additional factors and suggestions that can influence the quality of parenting time, visitation and other family access experiences.

### Cultural Sensitivity and Cultural Competence

Culture is more complex than either ethnicity or race. Culture refers to the total system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and standards of behavior that regulate life within a particular group of people. Culture includes components that organize people into social groups and that regulate both individual and group behavior.

Culture includes cognitive systems such as beliefs, attitudes and values. It includes norms, which are rules regarding appropriate ways of behaving, and provides definition of roles, which are appropriate and expected behaviors of certain peoples based upon their gender, social position, or area of responsibility in the society. It includes spiritual or religious systems and institutions. It includes language, which is the principle tool for communication among group members. Culture also includes the products of life, including the art and artifacts produced by the group.

...Cultural components are created by individuals and incorporated into group life to regulate social organization and to assure the survival and well being of group members.

What is true is that culture, in contrast to race, gender, or ethnicity, is *transmitted through learning*...

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Culture is a significant factor in every child’s life. It is important to explore the child’s and their family’s cultural makeup even if there are no perceptible differences.

Some of the following questions may be helpful in thinking about how to approach a culturally different family (first five from Berg and Kelly, 2000, pp. 282-283).

- What types of discipline does the family consider to be appropriate?
- Who usually is involved in childcare responsibility? Extended family? Informal kin?
- What methods do this family use to solve its problems? How does it communicate?
- How are cultural beliefs incorporated in the way this family functions? How does the family maintain its cultural beliefs?
- What family rituals, traditions or behaviors exist? [How do they celebrate?]
- What is accepted supervision?
- What are preferred meals/foods? Any dietary restrictions?
- Who is the family?
- How highly is education held?
- What are medical practices/beliefs?

## Interpersonal Issues Impacting Visits

Interpersonal issues that may impact visits include (Haight et al, 2001, p. 26):

- ✓ [Parents'] feelings of grief, trauma, and rage surrounding the presence of social services and/or forced separation from their child; the complexities of leave taking; parents' uncertainty and discomfort within limit setting and discipline during [parenting time].
- ✓ Parents may require support in resolving these feelings about their children's placement before they may benefit fully from necessary services. In addition, they may need coaching and support in dealing with the psychological and interpersonal complexities of visiting such as dealing with transitions - "hello and good-bye" and setting limits.
- ✓ Caseworkers' dilemmas surrounding their multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles of supporting, monitoring and assessing parents. Workers may require education to successfully juggle their roles.
- ✓ Foster parents' difficulties in preparing children for visits and responding to some children's intense and problematic responses to visits. Foster parents may require education and training to adequately support children in these situations.





## Written Visitation/Contact Plans

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A written visiting plan is a powerful tool and shapes a parent's visiting pattern. Hess (2003, p. 4) asserts:

The plan serves as an agreement between the agency serving the child in placement and the child's family. It clarifies the structure of visiting, logistics, necessary tasks, and the roles and responsibilities of placement caregivers, family members and agency staff. A written plan reassures children and their families that the agency is invested in protecting family relationships. It also identifies possible consequences should the plan not be adhered to.

### When a Plan for Visitation/Contact Must Be Developed

The State of Ohio requires a case plan that includes visitation requirements when children are placed in out-of-home care. A visitation schedule must be developed for the parent(s) or guardian, or other relatives defined in section 5101:2-42-92, Visiting For Child in Temporary Custody. *Each PCSA or PCPA shall arrange for and provide each child in temporary custody, whether custody is by agreement or commitment, an opportunity for regular and frequent visitation with parent, guardian, or custodian.*

Such visitation schedule shall be developed in accordance with the requirements of this rule and contained in the case plan as required by rule 5101:2-39-081 of the Administrative Code of PCSAs and rules 5101:2-39-10 and 5101:2-39-11 of the Administrative Code for PCPAs. Therefore, Ohio Statute requires a written case plan including visitation requirements and schedule within 30 days after the child is placed by court order or by the voluntary release of the child by the parent(s).

- (1) The schedule must be developed jointly, and implemented and reviewed utilizing the JFS 01444 "Family Decision Making Model, Part II: Case plan."
  - (a) Child's parent, guardian or custodian;
  - (b) Prefinalized adoptive parent, if applicable; and,
  - (c) Guardian ad litem.
- (2) All parties involved in the development, implementation and review of the case plan attempt to obtain agreement on the contents of the case plan.
- (3) Reasonable and timely notification of the opportunity to participate in the development, implementation and review of the case plan shall be provided to the substitute caregiver, including a relative who is fulfilling this role.

Going beyond the requirements of the statute, best practice indicates development and utilization of a comprehensive visitation plan that has a positive influence on parent visiting and reunifying.

Research on parental visiting of children in foster care indicates a strong relationship between the development of a visiting plan and actual visitation by parents. Caseworker's

attitudes and behaviors that express encouragement for visiting also have a positive influence on parent visitation (Leathers, 2002; Haight, 2001; Haight et al, 2001; Kovalesky, 2001). Although the case plan with the visitation schedule needs to be developed within 30 days of placement, visits between the child and parents or caregivers should occur within 24-48 hours of placement (refer to Appendix B, Visitation Planning, Assessing, Observing and Evaluating Form Examples for Temporary Visitation Schedule).

Research found that case plans specify visiting in accord with agency policy, and that parents visit in accord with case plans. If there is no schedule for visits, parents do not visit. But if there is a schedule, parents tend to keep it, especially if they were involved with making the schedule (Hess and Proch, 1988, p.8).

Therefore, a family's visitation schedule should be developed with the input of the birth parent, foster parent and worker. The schedule should not be developed "for" but rather "with" the visiting team. This should be accomplished within 3 days of removal. At this time, the birth parent and foster parent have an opportunity to meeting each other, ask questions, share pertinent information about the child (Family Team Meeting), and schedule visits. The schedules of both the birth parents and foster parents need to be considered when thinking about schedules. Parents may have work schedules, or other appointments pertaining to their case plans that may prohibit visits from occurring at certain times. Foster parents may have other children whose own visits and schedules may make it difficult to schedule visits during certain hours. Time frames that are convenient for everyone is a challenging task but can occur with cooperation.

Sometimes parents are unclear about how to participate in parenting time or are unsure of their ability to do so. It is the caseworker's responsibility to empower parents through the planning process, identify the barriers, and work through the obstacles. Supervisory or other decision-making consultation forums are resources to assist caseworkers in working through these types of challenges.

**"There is a preferred visiting plan in every case that will best meet individual children's and parents' needs and closely parallel the service plan. Reaching for the ideal in a plan does not deny the realities that may affect implementation; but assuming that the preferred or ideal plan can never be implemented guarantees that we will fall short of our standard" (Hess and Proch, 1988, p. 12).**

## **Content of Visitation/Contact Plans**

CLA's family involvement strategies including Team Decision Making, Family Team Meetings and/or Family Group Conferences provide forums in which visitation plans are developed. These strategies bring together immediate family members, their extended family and support systems, and their relevant service providers involved to share the information and resources available for the family to develop visitation plans based on specific

considerations regarding child safety, child development and special needs. The family and their extended system of support are the enduring connections available to the child through time and the preservation of safe connections and attachments are of paramount importance.

The items below are elements that should be included in a visitation/contact plan:

- case plan goals along with a description of the connection between case goals and purpose of visits as they pertain to the risk to the child, within the context of the reason(s) we are involved and in language parents can understand;
- risk(s) to be reduced to facilitate reunification;
- date the plan starts;
- persons to be present/included in visits, (parents, siblings, grandparents, kin/other relative);
- frequency, duration and intensity of visits including date, visit length and start and end times;
- include plans for other forms of contact between family members. Other forms of contact may include telephone calls, letters, emails, exchange of photographs and video tapes; assess the need for censoring and/or monitoring the method and content of these contacts;
- arrangements for monitoring or supervision;
- identify the visit supervisor;
- identifying contact information regarding the family members and others relevant to the visiting plan, including whom to contact if a visit needs to be canceled;
- visit location;
- transportation arrangements;
- date the plan will be reviewed;
- behaviors which will terminate family interaction or contact;
- behaviors that will be observed and assessed;
- if specific times are not set up, state who is responsible for arranging the visits, including who will initiate the calls for visits;
- visit activities; when parents are expected to perform certain tasks, this should be clearly stated in the plan, (e.g., bring diapers, meal, or snacks);
- negotiated and/or required visit conditions (refer to the section *Visitation Handbook for Birth Family/Caregivers* and for examples in Appendix C);
- agency services to support visiting, (clarification of who is responsible for transportation, financial assistance to the parents which may include child care for children who are living at home and/or gas money);
- procedures for handling problems with visitation;
- plan for handling emergency situations;
- list any persons prohibited from the visit;
- names of parents or guardians, social worker and if others involved in jointly making the plan;
- signatures of persons participating in plan development; and,
- date of the planning meeting (for more information, refer to Appendix B for Visitation Plan examples).

In developing a child-family contact plan consideration shall be given to the child's school schedule, the parent(s)' work and treatment obligations. Visits are to be scheduled whenever possible on days and during hours that will not cause child(ren) to miss school, preschool, early intervention program, or other school activities in which the child(ren) may be participating.

### **The Review and Revision of Visitation/Contact Plans**

Visitation/contact plans must be reviewed and modified any time a child's placement changes and every 90 days until the child returns home or custody is awarded to a relative or an adoption is finalized. This review is accomplished through a Family Group Conference, Case Review Meeting, SAR or another type of Family Conference.

Good practice requires that as the child and family's situations change or the family requests a review, the visitation plan is revised. Some visitors may be added to or eliminated from the plan. There are some situations that may trigger a review of the visitation plan before the 90 day mark, such as a parent's absence from visits or a child's reaction to visits (refer to Appendix B for Visitation Review Meeting form).

When changes need to be made to a family's visitation schedule, parents should be consulted regarding the reasons why, what the changes will be and when they will take place. Parents should be given the opportunity to give input or make changes in their behavior before any modifications occur. Unless the change is an emergency and presents a safety issue for the children, caseworkers should always attempt to talk to parents about any circumstances that may impact a parent's ability to visit. Same approach should be taken with others involved in the development of the visitation plan.

Developing and modifying a visitation schedule and plan must adhere to the OAC 5101:2-39-08.1

### **Parental Cooperation**

If parents frequently absent themselves from visits, make unrealistic promises, or exhibit other destructive behavior during visits, the following should be considered (OCWTP Core 104 Handout #7, 2001, p. 3):

- A parent's [absence] from a scheduled visit will be less disruptive to the child if the visit can be conducted within the context of the child's normal daily activities, in the foster home or another [natural] setting.
- Visits can be held in the home of a relative; the child still visits with family and friends even if the parent does not attend.
- Regular conferences between the parent, the foster parent, the caseworker, the supervisor, and appropriate others can address the parent's absence from visits.

There are times when a child may become excessively upset either prior to or after a visit with the parent (OCWTP Core 104 Handout #7, 2001, pp. 3-4):

- Normal feelings of loss and separation may be reactivated by seeing the parent and may be expressed in emotional distress or behavioral acting out.
- The child may be anxious and fearful when with the parent therefore, their time together may be stressful.
- The child may experience loyalty conflicts after having visited with the parent, and may need to reject the foster caregiver upon return to the foster home in order to continue to feel loyal to the parent.

The caseworker should fully assess the reasons for the child's distress and, if appropriate, revise the visitation schedule accordingly (OCWTP Core 104 Handout #7, 2001, p. 4):

- If the child becomes upset during visits due to feelings of separation and loss, the frequency of visits should be increased rather than decreased.
- If the child is anxious because the child is not comfortable with the parent, increasing contact, perhaps with social worker involvement to ease the discomfort, is useful.
- If loyalty conflicts contribute to the child's distress, the social worker can reassure the child that it is OK to care for both their family and their foster family.
- If the child appears to be fearful and reluctant to visit with the parent, the caseworker should encourage the child to talk about their fears, and reassure the child that the worker will insure their safety. Visits should be supervised and monitored.

**"The extent of the parents' [cooperation] with the visiting plan must be considered in visit arrangements. [Limited cooperation] may be examined at two levels: the actual behaviors and the meaning of the behaviors. Depending on the persistence and meaning of the [limited cooperation]. A social worker's response may differ. For example, parents might not cooperate with a plan for weekly visits at home, often not being there or always late when the child is brought for visits. This behavior might indicate an inability to keep track of the visit schedule, ambivalence about visits in the home and family reunification, worry about their own ability to care for or protect the child in the home, reaction to the pain of being separated from the child, disinterest in the child's return, and so forth. Each explanation suggests different actions for [caseworkers] to take.**

**The reasons for [limited cooperation] with visit arrangements should always be explored. The lack of compliance might be due to problems with money, transportation, or child care; inability to tell time; changes in parents' work schedules; discomfort with the degree of responsibility given to them for the child's care; or simply misunderstanding of the arrangements. Eliminating such obstacles should always be tried before visit arrangements are modified (adapted from Hess and Proch, 1988. p.41).**

## Documentation of Visitation

Because visiting is an essential element of the agency's service to families, accurate records must be maintained regarding the visitation plan and its revisions, the family's involvement in visiting, and the visit-related services provided. Detailed documentation may become pertinent in court proceedings.

Although all persons providing visit-related services may have direct observations to record, social workers must be clear where and by whom the agency's official records of each child's visits are maintained. COA requires documentation of contact with families in case records within 24 hours of contact.

Documentation should include the following items:

- identify child by name;
- type of contact (method: face-to-face);
- date of service;
- location of contact;
- name or provider/agency and person providing service and
- name and relationship of the contact person to the child (when contact was not with the child);
- actual visit participants;
- actual visit frequency;
- time parent or caregiver arrived and the length of the visit;
- location;
- problems or difficulties occurring in visits; why visits did not occur;
- observed visit interactions/activities, including positive outcomes between the child and parent/caregiver;
- specific parenting behaviors demonstrated by the caregiver during the visit;
- whether the social worker (or designee) needed to intervene and why;
- who observed visit;
- how caregiver and child greeted and separated and specific behaviors noted;
- what happened after the visit (caregiver and child reactions/how they viewed the success of the visit.);
- caregiver/child comfort level with each other;
- caregiver's understanding of child's developmental stage;
- caregiver's ability to set boundaries and limits;
- caregiver's ability to engage in appropriate activities with child;
- caregiver's ability to place child's needs (emotional or physical) above their own; and,
- worker shared and processed with caregiver observations from the visit.

Historically, observations regarding visits have been documented through the use of case recordings. However, developing a form allows the worker to observe the same areas of behavior at each visit in a more objective and consistent style (for several examples of observation forms, refer to Appendix B).



## Team Responsibilities Regarding Visits

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Team members involved in the development and implementation of the visitation schedule and plan must be aware of their responsibilities to assure successful contacts.

### Agency Staff

Agency staff should review and ensure the following responsibilities are met to assure successful visitations between children and their parents/caregivers:

- ✓ meet privately with child to assess his/her feelings and wishes regarding visits;
- ✓ help parents plan visit activities. Some parents may need additional guidance, for example, a parent may need to learn the range of time to offer snack or meal and type of food to offer;
- ✓ inform foster parents of experiences occurring during a visit that may affect the child's behavior;
- ✓ provide or arrange for transportation of the child, family, or friends to the visit, if needed;
- ✓ assist with child or adult care, housing or meals;
- ✓ clarify documentation expectations for foster parents, especially when working with new providers;
- ✓ ask for picture identification if parents or others involved in family access activities are not known to us;
- ✓ provide parent, foster parents, and others involved with information about how to reach them in an emergency;
- ✓ discuss with parents any recommendation to change or suspend visits;
- ✓ discuss absence from visits/parenting time with parents to determine the cause; and,
- ✓ discuss changes needed to make visits more satisfactory with parents, foster parent or residential care provider, child and appropriate professionals and design a plan of action to correct situations when needed.

### Multiple Staff or Service Providers

In some cases, multiple staff and service providers are involved with children and families. The case plan may delegate some face-to-face contacts, to other staff or to providers with a contractual relationship with the agency, to be responsible for certain visitation activities.

Shared responsibilities between the other service providers and agency include:

- ✓ clearly defining roles and responsibilities for the agreed upon services related to parenting time, worker visits, and family access to other family members and/or significant others, (transportation arrangements, case plan and service contact documentation expectations, etc);
- ✓ wrapping supports around the family to ensure frequent and quality visitation; and,
- ✓ securing appropriate signed releases of information so parties know if there's a change in permanency goals or other service plan goals, which may affect the visits.

## Parents

Parents can demonstrate their willingness, confidence, and capacity during parenting time with their children by:

- ✓ taking the parental role during interactions with his or her child;
- ✓ planning an activity to participate in with the child during visits, which may include bringing or providing food, diapers, special toys or games;
- ✓ responding to direction from the visit supervisor when parenting time is supervised;
- ✓ following the pre-established guidelines and rules as outlined in the agency's visitation handbook for parenting time and respecting agreed upon start and end times;
- ✓ not allowing unauthorized visitors to be present during visits;
- ✓ calling as soon as possible if unable to participate in visits as planned;
- ✓ being responsible for their child(ren) during parenting time. This includes spending the scheduled time with child(ren), picking up, preparing and cleaning up after meals; and,
- ✓ providing their own transportation whenever possible.

## Relative Caregivers

When relatives care for children in cooperation with the agency, many of the responsibilities listed under the foster parents section apply (see below). However, these individuals may have been the ones to report concerns about the child's safety and well-being, which led to the child being placed outside of their home. Kin may be especially challenged when the child is upset or acts out after visits. They may need extra support from the caseworkers in order to encourage parenting time and maintain appropriate boundaries.

## Foster Parents

Foster parents are essential partners in maintaining connections between children in out-of-home care and the people who are important to them. Among the many responsibilities foster parents agree to accept upon certification and recertification, the following are additional visit-related responsibilities.



**Before a Visit,** the

foster parent should take on the following preparation responsibilities:

- ✓ having the child ready, including having clothing packed for overnight visits;
- ✓ along with the worker, prepare the child for what to expect at the visit;

- ✓ plan for how you can help promote relationships and attachment between the child and birth parent (for ideas on promoting and establishing relationships, refer to Appendix D for the PCSAO Framework for Relating Guide);
- ✓ discuss with worker how children can be supported by the impact of visits;
- ✓ ask the child what he/she would like to do at the visit and help the child communicate this to the parent;
- ✓ ask the child if they would like to take something with them to share at the visit;
- ✓ be supportive and respectful towards the birth parent; and,
- ✓ briefly update the birth parent on how the child is doing, share new information, etc.

**Involvement in Visits** include the following responsibilities for foster parents:

- ✓ being actively involved in visits, modeling healthy parent-child interactions and teaching child care and safety (e.g., feeding, nutrition, hygiene, development, safety precautions, etc), if agreed to as part of the plan;
- ✓ promoting positive interaction between birth parent and child;
- ✓ interacting with parent as mentor (foster the whole family, not just the child);
- ✓ not doing anything for the child during the visit that parent could not do;
- ✓ coaching parent in how to handle situations, if appropriate;
- ✓ teaching child care and safety (ex: feeding, nutrition, hygienic, development, safety, precautions, etc);
- ✓ intervening if the birth parent request assistance, if there is a safety issue or if things go in a negative direction;
- ✓ following agency rules and plans in regard to visitation;
- ✓ providing positive feedback and encouragement to the parent whenever possible;
- ✓ if visits need to end early, provide to the parent a clear message about what they need to stop or change before ending the visit. If they do not, pull the parent aside and tell them respectfully the visit need to end and why. Allow the parents to say goodbye to the child if it can be done appropriately;
- ✓ being aware of the visiting person bribing the child or making false promises and addressing this behavior with the caseworker after the visit.

**After Visits**, responsibilities for foster parents may include:

- ✓ paying attention to the child's behavior and reaction to the visit;
- ✓ objectively documenting observations and sharing them with the worker;
- ✓ relaying any concerns/suggestions to improve visitation and increase the likelihood of reunification;
- ✓ maintaining continuous contact with the worker regarding matters significant to the adjustment and welfare of the child (report behavior that will help the worker understanding the child's current emotional/behavioral state);
- ✓ supporting the child/don't blame the parent, even when contacts are disrupting or confusing;
- ✓ comforting, reassuring, encouraging child to express feelings openly about visits;
- ✓ speaking positively about the parent to the child and others;
- ✓ notifying the worker of any unplanned contacts;
- ✓ discussing own reaction to visit arrangements with the worker, not the child or parent;
- ✓ understanding that troubled behavior after a visit often represents the child's attachment to the birth parents and the trauma of separation;

- ✓ if you were supervising the visit and had to end it, discuss factually with the child the reasons why you had to end the visit; avoid blaming or talking negatively about the parent as much as possible (for more information on the impact of visits, refer to Appendix E).

**Careful Consideration of Foster Family's Schedule Supports Child's Well-Being**

**"The visit plan must also take the foster family's schedule into account. If a foster parent is expected to comfort a child following a visit, the plan must assure that he or she is home when the child returns from a visit, rather than have the child returned by a parent or a volunteer at a time when it is known that a foster parent will not be home and older child or someone else will be receiving the child. Similarly, visit beginnings and endings should not be scheduled at times that will be highly disruptive for the foster family, such as the family's regular dinner hour.**

**Visits on holidays or during vacation periods require particularly thoughtful advance planning in order to minimize confusion for the child and disruption for the foster family. When possible, visits to the child's home should be scheduled to begin and end at natural transition points, such as at the end of the school day before Thanksgiving rather than during Thanksgiving morning, to ease the separation for the child and decrease disruption for the foster family." (Hess and Proch, 1988, p.53).**



## Preparation for Visits

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Preparing all parties for visitation is key to successful outcomes in visitation.

### Preparing Parents For Visits

The goal of parenting time is to have a positive parent-child experience. Caseworkers can help parents prepare for this by letting them know what to expect:

- ✓ Many parents do not know what takes place at a visit. Take time to explain how a visit occurs, who will be transporting their child and what the rules and expectations are during a visit. It is helpful to have a meeting ahead a time with the parents to explain these issues, meet the foster parents and provide the parents an opportunity to ask questions.
- ✓ Discuss with the parents how to answer questions from their children about when they are going home or other questions about the removal.
- ✓ Remind parents that the first few visits may be an emotional time for themselves and their children. Give them tips on how to handle their own feelings as well as their child's. Workers also need to give parents encouragement and support including acknowledgement that this is a difficult time for the parents as well.
- ✓ Prepare parents for a range of possible reactions from their child. A child's confusion or sadness at being separated from their parents may be demonstrated through angry or controlling gestures.
- ✓ Discuss with parents how to separate at the end of a visit and prepare them for the fact that their child(ren) may want to go home. Share with them tips on how to end a visit while letting the parents know this may be a difficult task.
- ✓ Parents may have mixed feelings of hoping their child is fine versus "is this parent better than me"? Discussing the foster parent's role is helpful as well as arranging for a meeting between the parent and foster parent. Encourage the parent to talk to the foster parent and ask questions.
- ✓ Discuss with the parent the importance of consistently attending visits with their children and why it's important for them to visit.

Assisting parents in preparing for the actual visit can help a visit proceed smoothly and provide a positive experience for both parent and child. Caseworkers can help parents by (California Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (CAPSACI), 1997, p.9):

- assisting them in using encouraging statements with their child, such as "You did a good job." "Wow, you are learning new things." "Great." "I am proud of you." You are taking turns nicely."
  - discussing bringing toys, which will evoke positive memories.
  - planning some developmental age appropriate games or activities which the child will enjoy doing.
  - encouraging them to being open to any feelings their child may share.
  - asking them to be supportive of the person taking care of their child.
  - suggestions for what to say at the end of the visit might be helpful: "Have a good time with (caregiver), I will see you in (x number of) days."
-

Having to visit with their children within the confines of a schedule and court order can be an emotionally charged activity for many parents. Parents have lost control of their families, their problems have become public and losing custody underscores the loss of parental authority. It is important that workers help parents work through these feelings so parents can then begin addressing the issues that have brought them to this point. By giving parents information, making them a part of the process and connecting them with resources will help jumpstart the process.

**Preparing children** for visiting should focus on their anxieties and fears concerning being with parents and the limits on contact that are imposed. Recognize that it is normal for children to be nervous, ambivalent, and confused about visiting, and preoccupied with details. Who will pick me up? Where will it be? Will I be home for lunch? Since younger children have difficulty with time, the days of the week and phrases such as “for an hour” have little meaning. Use instead the child’s understanding of schedule, such as before or after lunch, while Sesame Street is on, or on the day that Billy and Susie don’t have to go to school. Providing an individual calendar with visiting days marked helps school-age children keep track of the visiting schedule (Hess and Proch, 1988, p.57).

Visitation can be a confusing and unsettling experience for children, especially young children who do not have the ability to understand the complexity of adult issues. It is therefore the responsibility of both the foster parent and caseworker to explain to children the issues surrounding visitation.

Depending on the child’s age and ability to understand, the worker should discuss with the child what to expect at a visit. Explaining where the visit will be held, rules, and how long a visit will last will let children know what will happen when they see their family. Other suggestions may include:

- Help children cope with the reality that they will not be going home with their parents after the visit. This is especially important in the initial stages of visitation. Children may believe they are going home and can become confused, upset or angry when they don’t. Young children can have an especially hard time understanding and preparing a child ahead of time can help minimize future difficulties.
- If a child is having a difficulty coping with being separated between visits, it may be helpful if the worker took pictures of the child with their family during visitation and allowed the child to take a photograph back to the foster home. Creating a calendar with dates of upcoming visits can be especially helpful for children who can read. A child would then have a visual reminder of their family, along with the upcoming dates of their visits.
- For children whose parents are inconsistent in attending visits or who do not attend their visitation, the worker should discuss with the child their situation and answer the child’s questions without criticizing or belittling their parents. Children have the right to information but workers and foster parents need to remember that children are

bonded to their parents for better or worse. Talking negatively about their parents may only create more anxiety for the child, anger and feelings of hopelessness.

Preparation is key for a successful visitation experience. Children who are prepared ahead of time are better equipped to deal with the emotional highs and lows that often accompany visitation. Planning with the child can also help to decrease anxiety. The child can be an active participant in order to make the visit as comfortable as possible. The plan can include any or all of the following (CAPSAC, 1997, p.12):

- the location of the visit;
- where everyone will sit during the visit. For instance, the child may want to be near the door or have the visitor across the room;
- what type of physical contact the child wants or does not want during the visit;
- if there are certain people the child would like or not like at the visit. (This needs to be pre-approved by the caseworker, therapist and/or court depending on the court's order);
- hand signals which the child can use to indicate a need for help from the visit supervisor;
- if there are topics the child does not want to talk about; and,
- after the visits, the child can tell the visit supervisor how the visit went and if any changes need be made for future visits (refer to Appendix E for more tips on preparing children for visits).



### **Preparing Foster Parents for Visitations**

Agencies should invite and encourage foster parents to attend team meetings, be involved with visits and follow up afterwards by providing them with the skills needed to support the children, such as:

- explaining the goals and importance of the visits to the foster parents;
- discussing with the foster parents the ways that visits can impact the child(ren), before and after and how foster parents feel they can support and assist children; and,
- encouraging foster families to discuss with the child before each visit what he/she would like to do as well as asking the child if there is something he/she would like to talk to his parents about during the visits (adapted from Haight, *Conducting Parent-Child Visits*, page 9).

Agencies should spend the time recruiting and training foster families on the importance of visitation and working with the child's family to achieve reunification (refer to *Building*

*Relationships Between Birth Parent & Foster Parent* section, p.49 for examples and explanations and Appendix D for the Framework for Relating).

### **Recruiting Foster Families**

Agencies should specifically recruit families that are willing and open to:

- ✓ help children and families be reunified;
- ✓ mentor/coach/teach birth parents;
- ✓ compassion for the birth parents;
- ✓ encourage parents to change, not condemn or punish them for their behavior;
- ✓ have regular contact with birth family members;
- ✓ go to the birth parents home or have the birth parents to their home;
- ✓ value the parent-child relationship;
- ✓ are emotionally mature and secure and do not need to meet their own needs through the child's attachment to them (they want the child to remain attached to the birth parents);
- ✓ good insight into their own feelings (how they are affected by a child's reaction to a visit, etc.); and,
- ✓ seeing their role as temporary.

### **Visitation Trainings For Foster Parents**

Agencies can assist foster parents in becoming comfortable, understanding and encouraging about visitations. This could occur through foster parent trainings with such training topics on:

- ✓ why do we have visits, family contact;
- ✓ preparing children for visits;
- ✓ reasons for not withholding visits or other types of contact;
- ✓ expectations for contact with the birth family (required of foster parents, not a choice);
- ✓ respecting the importance of the family to the child;
- ✓ making efforts to keep the child's relationship alive with the birth parents;
- ✓ keeping information about the child and family confidential;
- ✓ importance of speaking positively about the birth family with the child and others;
- ✓ how to handle an upset parent or relative if they approach the foster parent to discuss their feelings;
- ✓ understanding why behavior issues may arise for children who are visiting (refer to Appendix E for more tips on preparing Foster Parents);
- ✓ children's reactions to visits (refer to Appendix E for more information); and,
- ✓ ideas for how foster parents can promote relationships between children and birth parents (refer to Appendix D for the PCSAO Framework for Relating guide).

**Those transporting children** to and from parenting time and other family access activities can influence the quality of the visit in the following ways (CAPSAC, 1997, p.10):

- what they say to the child prior to turning him or her over to the person directly involved in the visit can assist the child to feel safe and secure. It is helpful to say something like, “This is Sally (if person is unknown to child such as a visit supervisor), have a good time. She will keep you safe during your visit. I will see you (give location) after the visit”;
- dropping off and picking up the child on time; and,
- allowing the child to talk about the visit. Avoid questioning that makes the child uncomfortable.





## Supervision/Monitoring of Visits

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Plans for supervising visits should be individualized and document the correlation to the child's safety and goals of their case plan. The caseworker should meet with parents, children, and youth separately to provide a shared understanding about why visits are supervised. Ties to the child's or youth's safety and well-being should be emphasized. Visits need to be closely supervised when there is concern that a parent may be physically or emotionally abusive to a child during the visit, or if the parent is known to behave in inappropriate or unpredictable ways. Visits need to be supervised if the child is visiting with a perpetrator [person of concern], or when the parent has been known to make unrealistic, or inappropriate promises to the child. Supervised visitation is also in the child's best interest when the child is afraid of being alone with the parent.

Visits must be supervised if it has been determined that the child may continue to be at risk if left unsupervised with the visiting person. In making this determination consider the following factors (adapted from Hess, 2003, p.13):

- ✓ the age of the child;
- ✓ risk to the child and context of abuse or relationship dynamics;
- ✓ the potential for abduction of child;
- ✓ emotional reactions of child; and,
- ✓ progress of parents who are learning new skills.

The parent or other visitors and the caseworker will discuss the need for supervised visits at the time the visitation plan is negotiated or renegotiated. Unless there are compelling reasons for structured supervision, consideration should be given for minimal amount of oversight during the visit. If visits will be supervised, the plan shall contain a statement of the reason supervision is required. Reasons for the supervision of visits may include facilitating interactions between the parent and the child, modeling positive parenting behavior, mediating conflict between the parent and the child, and providing protection for the child. If a parent requests supervised visits and there is no legal authority to be involved, ask them to consider family members or friends (Hess, 2003, p.14).

### Supervision/Monitoring Level

Visits can be considered "Structured" in that the presence of a designated third party is available for the purpose of evaluation and assessment of child-family interaction, and/or teaching and practicing of parenting skills.

Visits can also be considered separately or simultaneously as "Supervised" which include visits with a designated third party present to protect the emotional and physical safety of a child, evaluation and assessment may also occur but not the primary reason for the designated third party.

In recognition of the multiple purposes of family access and parenting time supervision, the

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following supervision/monitoring levels between types of visits may be helpful in developing, clarifying, and monitoring visitation plans (Hess, 2003, p.14).

Highly Structured/Strict Supervision	Moderate Structure/Supervision	Relaxed and/or Intermittent Structure/Supervision, Including Overnights	Unsupervised
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- **Highly Structured/Strict Supervision** - visits in which the child may not be removed from the presence of the supervisor.
- **Moderate Supervision** – visits in which the caseworker may delineate degree and type of supervisor activity on a case-by-case basis.
- **Relaxed and/or Intermittent Supervision, Including Overnight Visits** – visits in which the visit supervisor may be present for a portion of the visit and often the visits do not occur within the normal visitation location (e.g., agency).
- **Unsupervised, Including Overnight Visits** - visits in which the visit supervisor is not present for the majority or any of the visits but rather may check in with the visit party through a phone call or receive feedback after the visit. These visits most often would not occur within the normal visitation location (e.g., agency).

### Persons Supervising Visits

A range of persons may be appropriate to serve as visit supervisors, including agency staff and other community service providers, the child’s relatives, foster parents, other caregivers, student interns, clergy, and parent aides. Education around boundaries, expectations, documentation, etc., will be needed. Persons supervising the visitation also have an important role in contributing to the quality of the experience and should (CAPSAC, 1997, p.11):

- encourage positive interaction between the child and visiting party;
- if the parent has problems controlling the child’s behavior or setting limits, assist the parent. Every attempt should be made not to embarrass the parent in front of the child. Some instruction may need to be given to the visiting party after the visit;
- be aware of visiting person trying to win over the child with gifts or special things now and/or promised in the future;
- be aware of signals to child that may be reminiscent of things from past interactions, which told the child how to act. A nod of the head, finger pointing, winking, staring, glaring, body posture, etc.; and,
- if the child experiences undue discomfort during the visit, which is not decreasing, take the child aside and try to determine any needs the child has. If the anxiety continues and it is in the best interest of the child to stop the visit, this can be done.

If the visiting party will not conform to the guidelines, the visit can be terminated. Before stopping the visit give a clear message about what the visitor needs to stop or change. If

after being warned the visitor will not stop, terminate the visit. Tell the child that the monitor and visiting party “will work together to make future visits better but for now this visit will end.” Document the behaviors and warnings, which led to the visit being terminated (refer to the section on *Circumstances for Limiting and Terminating Visits*, p.45).

### **Foster Parents Training For Supervising Visits**

For foster parents that will be supervising visit, it is recommended for foster parents to receive additional training on:

- how to handle a birth parent who has been using substances just prior to the visit;
- what is a safety issue during a visit;
- mentoring/coaching/teaching parents during visits;
- modeling for birth parents but not doing for them something they could do themselves (allow the parent to be the parent);
- reasons to intervene during a visit and how to intervene; and,
- tools to guide visit observation.

### **Evaluation and Assessment of Visits**

Often agencies are called upon to evaluate and document visits in an effort to assist with decisions about reunification, family’s progress, attachment between the family and child and to build attachments. Documentation should be completed as the visitation occurs to preserve the accuracy of observations (for examples, refer to Documentation of Visits on p. 29). The use of a structured tool to evaluate and document the visits may be helpful in ensuring consistency and timeliness (refer to Appendix B for examples).





## Visitation Activities

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The caseworker should help the parents manage visits to benefit the child and plan activities that will ease anxiety and provide mutual gratification for the parent and child. Appropriate activities will also be determined by the specific goals of the parenting time.

Possible objectives for the family visits may include:

- establishing and/or strengthening the parent-child relationship;
- instructing parents in child care skills;
- helping parents become involved in the child's school, church, or community activities;
- helping parents gain confidence in meeting their child's needs;
- identifying and assessing potentially stressful situations between parents and their children;
- teaching parents how to identify and do developmentally appropriate activities with their child;
- giving parents an opportunity to decide whether they want to pursue reunification.

Care should be taken to make sure younger children are not propped up in front of the TV as an electronic baby sitter, or older children don't get put in the role of babysitter for younger siblings while home visiting.

Ideally, visits should involve parents in routine activities of parenting, such as attending his/her child's school functions, special occasions and medical check-ups, as well as engaging in feeding, diapering, and other direct child care responsibilities. In most cases, surprises—even pleasant ones—may increase a child's anxiety about what to expect (Hess, 2003, pp.14-15).

Older youth may respond well to going to a movie with their parent. Riding in the car on their way to having a beverage afterwards may present a comfortable opportunity for exchange of ideas or inquiries about how things are going. Depending on their age and interests, they may also enjoy exercising, playing Frisbee, soccer, going to the mall, or out for lunch. Other ideas may include participating in family picture appointment, going to the Public Library, or attending football games.

A helpful tool to assist parents in identifying and participating in activities with their child, refer to Attachment Building during Visitation book in Appendix F.



## Reactions to Visits

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### Reactions Children May Have To Visits

Children in foster care can experience a wide range of emotions when visiting their parents. Whether it is the first time they are seeing their parents since the removal or later in the visitation process, children's reactions often fluctuate according to the circumstances that have brought them into care, the uncertainty of what is happening to them or to what they may see as an unfair, prolonged separation from their family. The child's level of understanding, ability to process information and their level of resilience affects their demeanor during visits. Some examples a worker may see:

- The child is happy and comforted by the family
- The child may be resentful and/or fearful of the parent as a result of the maltreatment
- The child feels guilty and thinks that it is his/her fault for being taken away from the home
- The child is confused about why he/she can't go home. It is baffling for younger children to have two sets of parents. It is confusing when they hear other children in the home call the foster parents "mom and dad."
- The child is worried that she will be viewed as disloyal by her parents if she likes the foster family
- The child is anxious and worried about whether his/her siblings are okay and would like to visit
- The child is defensive when he/she perceives that the parents are being criticized by the worker or foster parents
- The child feels angry and sad about being separated from his/her family
- To cope with the loss and lack of control, the child regressed into acting babyish, becomes demanding and may be fearful or whining. The child may become depressed and have nightmares, wet the bed, become aggressive, be inattentive and complain of physical pains prior to and following visits

### Reactions Parents May Have To Visits

Regardless of why their children were removed, parents still feel the pain, humiliation and anger of losing custody of their children. Caseworkers can help parents manage their feelings by providing them with support, acknowledgement and referrals to groups or services that can help them work through their emotions. As parents work on managing their grief, workers may observe the following during visits:

- The parent is happy to see the child and comforted by the visit
- The parent feels that his/her parenting is being criticized and is defensive
- The parent feels competitive over the child's loyalty and may undermine the foster parent
- The parent is loving, and engages in activities that demonstrate deep affection for the child, such as cuddling and hugging
- The parent resents not being able to control the location, time and frequency of visits

- The parent is anxious and overcompensates by bringing the child numerous gifts, toys, or clothing items

### **Reactions Foster Parents May Have To Visits**

Regardless of why their children were removed, parents still feel the pain, humiliation and anger of losing custody of their children. Caseworkers can help parents manage their feelings by providing them with support, acknowledgement and referrals to groups or services that can help them work through their emotions. As parents work on managing their grief, workers may observe the following during visits:

- Is supportive and pleased that the child is comforted by visiting with family members;
- See his/her role as temporary and facilitates reunification;
- May not understand why the child is reacting so strongly to separation and blames the family for the child's behavior;
- Is critical of the birth family's parenting practices and inability to protect the child;
- Is resentful over the disruption that visitation causes the regular household routine and having to deal with the child's reactions;
- May resent visits with the parents and feel that visits are weakening the child's attachment to them;
- Are going to be supervising visits between parents and children and the social worker should insure that the foster parent(s):
  - Values the parent/child relationship;
  - Can objectively record visit interactions;
  - Can intervene if necessary;
  - Maintain confidentiality;
  - Have the time and resources.

Foster/adoptive families also need to understand the value of maintaining connections with significant members of the child's family even if they are not initially involved or involved separately in the case. Workers are required to complete an absent parent search in the event that one of the parent's identify is undetermined or their whereabouts are questionable. Also, many parents may not reside together but each parent is actively involved in the child's life. It is recommended foster/adoptive families make provisions to accommodate family members as required (adapted from Kentucky Visitation Materials).



## Circumstances In Which Visits May Be Limited Or Terminated

*For additional information, please refer to Written Visitation/Contact Plans section on page 17.*

Reasons for limiting or terminating visits must be documented in the case record. Visitation may be limited or denied only if the court determines that such limitation or denial is necessary to protect the child's health, safety, or welfare.

Visitation is to continue until such a court order is obtained, except in cases of imminent danger to the child's life, health and safety. In cases of imminent danger to the child's life, health and safety, the authorized agency may terminate or limit visitation. This does not apply if the parent or guardian agrees in writing to the termination or limitation of visiting (Hess, 2003, p.10).

### Procedures for Changing Visitation Plans

In any instance in which there are circumstances that necessitate a change in the Visitation Plan, the parents must be notified and a new agreement developed with them. Any ongoing changes in visitation require a new visitation agreement.

Parents who disagree with changes in the visitation plan may ask for a review. This may be done through the caseworker, the caseworker's supervisor, or the parent's attorney.

### Use of Visits to Reward or Punish

Visits cannot be used as either a punishment or a reward. Changes in visitation arrangements should be directly related to the ongoing risk and family assessment. Visitation that is contingent on behavior is not consistent with reunification. We should assess the behavior prior to changing the visitation plan. Hess and Proch offer the following guidance in this area (1988, p.15).

**Visiting arrangements directly depend on assessment of the parents' ability and of the risk to the child. As parents are able to assume greater responsibility for childcare and supervision, visits are planned more often, for longer periods, more frequently in the parents' home and with fewer restrictions. Arrangements, therefore, are a logical consequence of the assessment of parenting behaviors and the family situation, not a reward.**

**The distinction between perceiving changes in visiting arrangements as a logical consequence or as a reward is quite important. When you view changes in visiting as directly related to assessment of changes in families, visiting arrangements can be developed openly and as a part of the service plan.**

*The above sections are in accordance with OAC 5101:2-42-92 and 5101:2-42-93.*



## Special Circumstances For Visits

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### Domestic Abuse

Intimate partner or family violence cases are complex and can affect children in a profound way on an emotional level even if they are not physically harmed. In planning visits one needs to take into the account the child's need and desire to see both parents as well as the child's view of each parent.

Parents from homes where domestic violence occurred will not visit the child together until such a time that intervention and treatment specialists determine such visits pose no threat to any family member. When domestic violence is present in a family situation in combination with other forms of abuse, the impact on a child can be severe. An assessment of the situation needs to take into consideration the child's experience of the domestic violence could significantly differ from what the adult(s) experienced consideration shall be given to measures that meet the safety needs of the child and non-offending parent. When necessary, measures shall include, but are not limited to, arranging different visiting schedules, a safe drop-off, pick-up location, and safety plan in case the batterer unexpectedly appears (Hess, 2003, p.15). Safety can be increased by arranging for an officer (plain clothes) or signal that ends the visit if necessary.

### Sexual Abuse

In sexual abuse cases, caseworkers will need to spend as much time as needed to prepare the children and assess their readiness for visits. The Court may also set very clear boundaries about contact and supervised visits.

Other experts recommend:

**"Visits between the abuser [person who harmed the child] and a child should not commence unless the therapist for the child recommends that visits would help the child in the healing process and the therapist for the offender believes the visit would be therapeutically beneficial. It is preferable for these visits to occur with the child's therapist or that a person is present in the visit whom the child has a supportive relationship with" (Hess, 2003, p.16).**

Given therapeutic supports may or may not be in place when caseworkers start working with families, team and/or direct supervisory consultation are valuable resources for deciding when and how visits should begin.

## **Children Who Are Placed in Group Care Settings**

Agencies should ask questions when considering a child in a group care settings to determine the setting's policy and procedures on visitation. Specific issues dealing with visitation and the denying of visitation from the group care setting should be addressed in the agency's contract with the group care setting. A social worker may need supervisory or administrative support to impact "rules" and enforce visiting plans if group care settings deny or limit visits based on the child's behavior.

According to OAC 5101:2-09-15, residential facilities should provide residents and their families with a handbook that includes visiting hours and visitation and communication policies.

For more examples with special circumstances for visits, refer to Appendix G.

## **Termination of Parental Rights**

Visiting does not end when it is determined that reunification is not the goal unless parental rights are terminated or visits are prohibited by court order, parents and children have the right to visit. An agency decision against reunification in and of itself does not remove this right. Even if parental rights are terminated, visiting may take place during the appeal process.

Children may visit with their parents and families during the period following petitioning for termination of parental rights.

Any duty or obligation on the part of our agency to make reasonable efforts to strengthen the parental relationship shall cease upon the granting termination of parental rights.

This provision shall not be construed and is not intended to limit or affect in any way the parents' right to see or visit with the child during the dependency of a petition under this section. Consider planning a visit and/or other contacts, such as letters, for goodbyes, and rituals related to good-byes (Hess, 2003, p.16). For more information, refer to the section, *Good-bye Visits*, p. 54.

In some cases, contact and visitation of an older child or teenager and a parent whose rights were terminated previously may be appropriate. Teens and older children in other permanent placements besides adoptive homes may desire a relationship with a parent who has made changes and matured since parental rights were terminated.

## **Concurrent Planning Visits with Alternative Permanent Family**

For a concurrent planning case, an alternative family (family that will raise the child if he/she cannot be reunified with birth parents) should be identified as early as possible in the case. Once this family is identified and found to be appropriate, a relationship building process should begin. The alternative family should become a support for the child as well as the birth family. This should be accomplished through regular contact. Contact should

be arranged for the alternative family with the birth family. Visits should also simultaneously occur between the alternative family and the child.

If the birth family has an active role in choosing the alternative family, it would be ideal for the birth family to introduce the alternative family to the child (if the child doesn't already know them.) If the child does know the alternative family, it would be ideal for the birth family to help facilitate the relationship between the child and alternative family. This could be done using many of the relationship building activities listed in this guide for foster parents and birth parents. It should benefit the child in the long run to see that his birth family "approves" of the alternative family. It should also help the birth family feel that their child will be cared for. In addition, this should help the birth family feel more prepared to give the child the message he/she will need to hear in the "goodbye visit."

If it is determined that the child cannot be reunified with the birth family, the visits between the child and alternative family should increase in frequency and duration, working up to the child moving in with that family. The alternative family may be the foster family. If the alternative family is not the foster family, the foster family should be part of this process as well. Relationship building should be done between the foster family and alternative family too. This allows the child to have a solid support system in place to help him/her transition through the change process.

The alternative family needs to be a special family that is willing to get involved and take a risk. They need to be willing to become a support person for the birth family and the child, not knowing for sure what the future outcome of things will be. They may end up adding to their family or they may end up continuing to support the birth family and child if the child can return home. This is a win-win situation for the child. In the event that the child cannot return home and will be raised by the alternative family, it is hoped that there will be a good relationship between the birth parents and alternative family so the child can continue some contact with his/her birth family.





## **Building Relationships Between Birth Parent & Foster Parent**

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Foster families are invaluable community resources. As in other important relationships, there are ways to strengthen the partnership between foster parents and birth parents. The following considerations may be helpful in building and maintaining the relationship.

### **Ideas for Promoting Relationships Between Foster Parents and Birth Parents**

There are many activities foster parents and birth parents could do together to develop, increase and maintain a healthy, positive relationship. The agency should lend support to both families as they work on bridging a relationship. Depending on the child's family, the foster family may require assistance in identifying the most appropriate activities to do with the child's family that is productive yet safe. Helpful guides for agency staff in making determination about appropriate activities are the Public Children Services Association of Ohio's Framework for Relating or the Annie E. Casey Foundation Family to Family Bridge Document. The guides offer the following ideas:

- ☆ see the birth parents face to face as often as possible;
- ☆ talk about the child's likes, dislikes, daily activities, etc.;
- ☆ exchange photographs, gifts, etc.;
- ☆ allow the parents to give gifts (pre-approved by caseworker);
- ☆ give the parents photographs, artwork, schoolwork or allow the child to give such items;
- ☆ take photos at visits or video tape;
- ☆ allow the birth parent(s) to make an audio tape of a song, story, etc. to share with the child;
- ☆ complete a photo album/lifebook together;
- ☆ when safe, go together to the zoo, park or other events;
- ☆ go to doctor/therapist appointments together; inform the parents of the time, place, etc. (when okayed by the caseworker);
- ☆ dress the child, if young enough, in clothes provided or selected by the parents;
- ☆ get permission for hair cuts, piercing, etc.
- ☆ refer to the child's parents as Mom and Dad;
- ☆ avoid promises/conflict; always refer parents to the caseworker for questions the foster parents cannot answer;
- ☆ be honest, respectful and kind, regardless of what is believed about what the parents have done;
- ☆ write letters, send photos if there is no direct contact with the parents, either because they are not allowed to visit or cannot;
- ☆ foster parents can write notes and send with the child to a visit with the parents to read and be updated about the child's activities, progress, development, etc.;
- ☆ do not change the child's given name; respect the name given by the parents; ask if the name has special meaning such as the child being named after a family member;
- ☆ find common interests and experiences;
- ☆ talk openly about family to the child;
- ☆ send snack/activity for the visit;
- ☆ encourage parents' progress;

- ☆ share monthly progress reports;
- ☆ host/arrange sibling visits;
- ☆ request cultural information from birth family;
- ☆ help birth parent find community resources;
- ☆ foster parent transports birth parent to meetings;
- ☆ assist in planning the child's return to the birth home;
- ☆ attend parenting classes with birth parent;
- ☆ serve as support to the family following reunification;
- ☆ provide respite care after reunification; and,
- ☆ include parent in farewell activities.

Foster parents may also appreciate or may need additional suggestions on how to promote, strengthen and build the relationship with the child's parents/caregivers. Such activities should include inviting and encouraging foster parents to attend:

- Family Team Meetings (aka Parent to Parent meetings)
  - Introductions of foster parent to birth parent
  - Discussion of child's routine/schedule
  - Discussion of child's likes/dislikes
- Meetings for development of the Visitation Plan
  - Take the foster parents schedule into account but encourage them to be as flexible as possible in regard to scheduling and providing transportation for visits
  - Encourage their input in regard to the visitation plan (what will be the best time for visits based on the child's schedule and needs?)
  - Make sure they leave the meeting with a clear plan for who will do what in regard to visitation
- Other team meetings and reviews
  - Encourage them to share observations in regard to the child's adjustment, behavior, etc.
  - Encourage them to respectfully discuss any concerns in regard to visitation
  - Encourage them to express strengths in addition to concerns
  - Listen to their suggestions for improving visitation

## Supporting Foster Parents

- Agencies may want to consider a higher per diem for foster parents based on their level of involvement with birth families.
  - Regular caseworker visits to discuss visitation issues and share information.
  - If the foster parent was not involved in the visit itself, the caseworker should communicate any significant happenings so the child's reactions can be monitored.
  - Allow the foster parent to vent frustrations to the caseworker when needed.
  - Encourage foster parents to work with birth families and provide feedback regarding how they are doing.
  - Model positive talk about the birth family.
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- The caseworker should always speak of the birth family respectfully.

At times, foster parents are the ones to receive the phone calls from an upset parent, grandparent, or other relative questioning why their visits have been limited or stopped. Foster parents appreciate suggestions from workers on how to respond in this situation.

When appropriate, a child's foster family may be involved in the actual move from one home to another. This helps the foster parents' children see where their foster siblings will be living and may ease the child who is mourning feelings of loss (refer to Appendix D for the PCSAO Framework for Relating guide).

***Careful Consideration of Foster Family's Schedule Supports Child's Well-Being***

**"The visit plan must also take the foster family's schedule into account. If a foster parent is expected to comfort a child following a visit, the plan must assure that he or she is home when the child returns from a visit, rather than have the child returned by a parent or a volunteer at a time when it is known that a foster parent will not be home and older child or someone else will be receiving the child. Similarly, visit beginnings and endings should not be scheduled at times that will be highly disruptive for the foster family such as the family's regular dinner hour.**

**Visits on holidays or during vacation periods require particularly thoughtful advance planning in order to minimize confusion for the child and disruption to the foster family. When possible, visits to the child's home should be scheduled to begin and end at natural transition points, such as at the end of the school day before Thanksgiving rather than during Thanksgiving morning, to ease the separation for the child and decrease disruption for the foster family" (Hess and Proch, 1988, p.53).**



## Visitation Handbook

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It is recommended for agencies to develop a Visitation Handbook for parents that outline the purpose and details about visitation. Agency staff should review the Visitation Handbook with the child's parents before the initial visit. The following are items that must be included in the handbook:

1. Mission Statement
  2. Introduction/Purpose of handbook
  3. Table of contents
  4. Values/purpose of visitation
  5. Description of visitation planning process
    - a. How is plan developed
    - b. What is a team meeting
    - c. What is included - time, place, duration, frequency, who may visit, other limits or special consideration
    - d. How/when plan can be amended
    - e. Additional supports offered by agency - i.e. transportation to visits etc.
  6. Guidelines/Rules for Visitation (Should be determined by individual agencies)
    - a. General Guidelines
      - i. Visitation policy including arrival and departure procedure, pre-visitiation and post visitation procedures
      - ii. Missed visits/canceled visits procedure and makeup procedure
      - iii. Inclement weather and other emergency procedure
      - iv. Explanation of types of visitation: i.e. unsupervised to highly structured
      - v. Explanation of roles of those supervising visits
    - b. Housekeeping guidelines - Examples of what may be included:
      - i. Food policy
      - ii. Smoking policy
      - iii. Gift policy
      - iv. Consideration for others visiting
      - v. Care of visiting area
    - c. Safety of Child Guidelines/Controls (do's and don'ts for visit) - Examples of what may be included
      - i. Use of physical discipline
      - ii. Use of drugs, alcohol, or possession of weapons
      - iii. Unrealistic or inappropriate promises
      - iv. Guidelines on inappropriate touching, whispering etc
      - v. Situations under which visitation may be limited, etc.
      - vi. Security policy
  7. Developmentally appropriate ideas/suggestions for activities during visitation
  8. Discussion of normal expectations, emotions, and feelings experienced during stages of visitation by parent, child, caregiver and caseworker
  9. Suggestions for activities to prepare for visitation for parent, child, caregiver and caseworker
  10. Rights and responsibilities of parent, child, caregiver and caseworker
  11. Complaint/appeal process for parents who disagree with the visitation plan
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12. Sanctions/consequences for parents who do not follow visitation plan
13. Listing of agency contacts (including chain of command) and important phone numbers
14. Frequently asked questions

A Handbook created for foster parents and caseworkers would also be helpful so all parties are clear about the purpose and details of visitations. The following is additional information to be included in a foster parent and caseworker handbook:

1. Attachment/bonding checklist (what to look for in assessing attachment and bonding at different age levels)
2. Preparation tools for working with family, child and caregiver before, during, and after visits
3. List of commonly seen reactions and related behaviors surrounding visitation
4. Developmentally appropriate tasks related to visitation activities
5. Symptoms commonly seen in children with attachment problems
6. Information on when/how to intervene in visitation
7. Assessment tools to use while supervising visitation

Refer to Appendix C for specific examples of Visitation Handbooks.





## Goodbye / Moving On Visit

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A special and perhaps most difficult form of visit is the one that takes place between the child and his / her birth family after termination of parental rights, and at the time of placement in a closed adoption. Much of the literature on separation and loss supports this type of visit whenever a child is about to lose an important attachment figure whether through death, a move or loss of custody. Children can accept painful reality better than facing the unknown.

### **Important Aspects of Goodbye Visits**

The child should be told the reason that he/she is no longer able to live with the birthparent(s). It is especially important that the child be told that the termination of parental rights was not his/her fault. Also important is the birth parent's giving permission for the child to attach to an adoptive family. This "blessing" by the birth family can minimize the loyalty conflicts experienced by the adopted child, especially those adopted at an older age. The child must also be helped to understand the permanence of the termination and subsequent placement.

### **Suggestions for Facilitating the Visit**

Both the birth parent and the child need a great deal of support in this process. The birth parent has to decide how to explain the reason for termination and placement prior to the visit but he or she should not be expected to do so alone. The social worker can act as a resource by helping the parent translate adult ideas into language that is understandable by children. To the extent possible, the parent should be encouraged to accept responsibility for what has occurred rather than to blame the child welfare system or a spouse or other family member.

It may also be helpful to vary goodbye visits according to the age of the child. For example, one visit may be best for a young child, but a series of two or three visits may facilitate the grieving process for older children. Although the content of the visits may be similar, the child will be able to absorb more of the meaning during the second and third visits because there is more time to deal gradually with the shock and denial. While the timing of multiple visits may vary based on the situation, it is advisable for all of the visits to occur within a one week period (Knight 1985). Another useful strategy is to make a tape of the visit so that the child may replay it at appropriate times.

### **Possible Issues**

Some parents may refuse to participate. It should come as no surprise considering the intensity and grief involved. Some parents may find it easier to pretend that they had no role in losing custody of the child, preferring to blame the loss on the judge or the agency.

Other parents who appear unwilling may be able to participate if more direction and support are given. Concrete supports such as transportation, and emotional support and

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prompts during the visit can help parents feel like they can get through a very difficult time.

Another possible problem is the impact of negative statements. Even when a lot of structure and rehearsal go into preparing for a visit, there is the risk that the parent will say something damaging to the child. It is important for these visits to be fully supervised so that the worker can be prepared to intervene as necessary. If a negative statement is made the worker should firmly but gently confront it immediately. Even if the parent does not retract the statement, giving the child a more accurate explanation with the parent present will have a stronger positive effect than explaining later.

### **Impact on Worker, Parent, and Child**

It is important to remember that goodbye is a process and not an event. After the goodbye visit, all parties will continue to have strong reactions. For the worker, it is important to find ways to take care of her /him self and to engage in a relaxing activity. The worker should also be mindful that these visits may be particularly difficult if the worker is struggling with her or his own recent losses. In that case, it may be helpful to seek out individual counseling.

For both the parent and the child, the goodbye visit does not mark the end of grief but is instead a means for facilitating the grieving process. Expect that all parties will continue to experience strong feelings during and after the visit. This is a healthier way of dealing with the loss than to ignore it or keep it hidden. In the long run, investing the financial and emotional resources in facilitating goodbye visits will have positive benefits for the child, the family, the worker and the agency.





## Agency's Implementation

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Implementing change can be exciting especially when it improves our practice and facilitates permanency for children yet it can be challenging and even frustrating at times. The complexity of changing the way you do business will become more evident as implementation unfolds. Agency should take some time in preparing staff, families and partners for changes while acknowledging resistance and avoidance may occur.

Programmatic changes for visitation and family access have the best chance of success if the following can occur:

*Change comes from the top down.* Administration is the authority when it comes to setting standards in their agencies. They decide policy and allocate resources. The message from administrators and supervisors should be that they support an improved process for visitation and family access.

*Promotion of a quality visitation program.* Staff must understand how increasing the amount and quality of family contacts impacts their practice in a positive way. Staff often want to know that the changes they are being asked to make will really work and are not just a fad. It is management's responsibility to help facilitate programming they believe will improve their agencies practice.

*Understanding the theory and concepts behind quality visitation.* Staff must receive the message of why better visitation practices are good for families and children. Training on the stages of visitation, bonding and attachment and the purpose of visitation are all important to getting staff buy-in when making changes. Staff often want to know if their efforts are going to be worth it.

*Creating the opportunities to make changes.* Workers should receive the message from supervisors and administration that the agency is willing to give them the support, resources and time to implement change.

*Management should "walk the talk".* Management needs to be willing to back up any new policies, assist in working out problems and give support and encouragement to staff. Staff needs to see that they are not left to implement program changes without the support of management or the resources to successfully implement a significant change in programming.

Successfully implementing change requires the commitment of management. These few tips can help facilitate a smoother transition and create the environment for providing quality visitation to families. The hope is that by doing so, families will have better opportunities to stay committed and connected, and permanency for children will be more quickly achieved.



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# APPENDIX A

- Tip Sheet for Fathers, Kentucky



## APPENDIX B

- Referral for Family Visitation, Athens
- Temporary Visitation Schedule, Athens
  - Visitation Plan, Athens
- Family Interaction Goal Plan, Wisconsin
- Interactions Program, Client Contact Sheet, Wisconsin
- Monthly Family Interaction Program, Services Summary, Wisconsin
- Family Interaction Program, Termination Summary Form & Report, WI
  - Family Interaction Intervention Report, Wisconsin
    - Visitation Observation Form, Athens
    - Visitation Assessment Guide, Guernsey
  - Questions Regarding Visitation, Kentucky
    - Visitation Review Meeting, Athens
    - Visitation Log, Athens
  - Family Interaction Report, Wisconsin



## APPENDIX C

- Ashtabula County Children Services Visitation Handbook
  - Athens County Children Services Visitation Handbook
    - Athens County Children Services Visitation Rules
- Clark County Department of Jobs and Family Services Visitation Handbook
- Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services Visitation Brochure
  - Linda Davis' Visitation Handbook
- Summit County Children Services Visitation Handbook
- Trumbull County Children Services Visitation Handbook
- Tuscarawas County Department of Jobs and Family Services Visitation Handbook



## APPENDIX D

- PCSAO Framework for Relating Guide
  - Family Team Meeting materials



## APPENDIX E

- Tip Sheet for Visitation Between Parents and Children, Kentucky
- Reactions Children May Have to Visitation with Parents, Kentucky
- Reactions Children Experience when Visiting with Parents, Kentucky
- Reactions Parents' Experience when Visiting with Children, Kentucky
  - Foster Parents' Reactions to Visits, Kentucky
  - Caseworker Feelings about Family Interaction, OCWTP
- Agency's Resources Committed to Family Interaction, OCWTP
  - Preparation of the Primary Family, OCWTP
  - Preparing Foster Parents for Family Visits, OCWTP
    - Preparing Children for Visits, OCWTP
    - Siblings Bill of Rights, OCWTP



## APPENDIX F

- Identifying Signs of Attachment , OCWTP
- Symptoms that are Commonly Seen in Children with Attachment Problems, OCWTP
  - Ways to Encourage Attachment, OCWTP
    - Observation Checklist, OCWTP
  - Alliance Formation, Strategies and Activities that Build Attachment
- Attachment Symptom Checklist for Children Under 5, Gregory Keck, PhD
  - Developmentally Related Visit Activities, Hess & Proch, CWLA
- Attachment Building During Visitation, Guernsey County Children Services



## APPENDIX G

- Family Interaction Program, Special Preparation in Cases of Family Violence/Sexual Abuse, Wisconsin
  - Referral Form, Lutheran Social Services
  - Family Interaction Report, Wisconsin
- Family Interaction Program, Information Sheet/Service Agreement, Wisconsin
- Interactions, Parent Outreach Worker, Qualification/Qualities, Wisconsin
- Interaction, Parent Outreach Worker, Staff Responsibilities, Wisconsin

