

The Importance of Visits between Parents and Their Children in Placement

Frequent visits between parents and their children can promote both placement stability and successful reunification. The absence of regular and frequent visits may have serious consequences for both the child and the parent.

- Without visitation, the parent/child relationship can deteriorate. Both parent and child may become emotionally detached. Once this has occurred, successful reunification is extremely difficult.
- Frequent contact can reduce the negative effects of the separation for the children.
- Seeing the parent during visits reduces the child's fantasies and fears of "bad things" happening to the parent and can often help older children eliminate self-blame for the placement.

Regular visits can be used to enhance the parent-child relationship and to promote the achievement of case-plan goals.

- The worker can observe and fully assess parent/child interactions during visits to identify parent's strengths and areas in which their child-rearing practices need to be more fully developed.
- Visits can be used by the worker, family support worker or foster parent to model more appropriate child rearing or parenting practices and to help the parent practice and perfect these methods.
- Visits with siblings and other family members allow the child to maintain relationships with others who are important to them, thereby keeping options open for permanent kinship care, if reunification with the parents is not possible.
- Visits communicate the agency's belief in the family as 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 in placement.

The criteria for decisions regarding the location, frequency and duration of visits, and whether visits should be supervised, include the following:

- The location of the visit should be the least restrictive, most normal environment in the community that can assure the safety of the child.
- The agency is the least normal, most institutionalized setting in which visits can take place. The visit should be held in the agency only if it is the only way the protection of the child can be assured.
- Visits should take place, in order of preference: 1) in the home of the parent; 2) in the home of a relative; 3) in the foster home; 4) in a neighborhood location, such as a community center, church, park, etc.
- Formal visits should be scheduled, at a minimum, weekly, and more often, if at all possible. The younger the child, the more frequent the visits need to be.
- Contact between a child in placement and the parent should occur several times a week, through telephone calls, cards, letters, parental attendance at children's activities and at medical or counseling appointments, in addition to face-to-face 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.
- Children may visit with other relatives, siblings and family friends in addition to parents.
- Overnight visits can be considered when it is assured that the child can be protected in the home.

Supervision of the visits may be warranted if:

- There is concern about physical or emotional abuse to the child during visits.
- The parent's behavior may be inappropriate or unpredictable, as when the parent is mentally ill or emotionally disturbed.
- When the visit is with the perpetrator in situations of physical abuse.
- When the parent verbally abuses the child, speaks critically of the agency or foster caregiver or makes unrealistic and inappropriate promises to the child.
- When the child is afraid to be alone with the parent.

Note: In child sexual abuse, the issue of visitation is more prescribed. The only way to assure the child victim's protection is to prohibit contact of any kind with the perpetrator. This always requires that either the victim or the perpetrator be separated from the family. Not only should the separation remain in force until the perpetrator completes intensive therapy, but if visits are to occur at all, they must be carefully based on treatment milestones and be highly supervised.

If the visit must be supervised, supervision can be provided by the caseworker, the foster caregiver, a non-abusive or neglectful family member or a family friend. The supervising person

should maintain a low profile and interfere only if needed. The parent should be allowed privacy with the child if the child's safety is assured.

If a goal of the visit is to help parents learn more appropriate parenting skills, the worker or foster caregiver can supervise the visit and be involved in the visit.

If parents frequently fail to come for visits, make unrealistic promises or exhibit other destructive behavior during visits, the following should be considered:

- A parent's failure to come to 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.
- The caseworker should stress the parent's responsibility to visit and should make transportation available when lack of transportation is a barrier.
- Regular conferences between the parent, the foster parent, the caseworker, the supervisor and appropriate others can address the parent's failure to visit.

There are times when a child may become excessively upset either prior to or after a visit with the parent.

- 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; 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.

- 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 he/she is not comfortable with the parent, increasing contact perhaps with caseworker involvement to ease the discomfort is useful.
- If loyalty conflicts contribute to the child's distress, the caseworker can reassure him/her that it is OK to care for both his/her family and his/her foster family.
- If the child appears to be fearful and reticent to visit with the parent, the worker should encourage the child to talk about his/her fears and reassure the child that the worker will ensure his/her safety. Visits should be supervised and monitored.