

# Commonly Asked Questions about Parent-Child Visits:

## **First Visits**

**The first days of placement are such an emotional time. Isn't it better to wait until I have completed an assessment before having the first visit?**

- Delaying the first visit won't make the emotions go away. In fact, emotions may become more intense the longer the child and parents are required to wait for the first visit, because after entering care, children feel like their entire lives have changed (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Hess & Proch, 1988; Weinstein, 1960). Having visits will help children know that some things are the same, that they have not been abandoned by their parents, and that their parents are okay. Parents will also have the reassurance that their children are okay.
- Some preparation needs to take place whether the first visit is on the first day of placement or sometime later. Work with families so they are prepared to handle their emotions in appropriate ways.

## **Parent-Child Contact**

**Should parents and children be allowed to have contacts that are not totally supervised, such as phone calls or email, during the first days of placement?**

- You should establish boundaries regarding all forms of contact. Be aware that, with the technology available to children, a child may have contact with a parent without you knowing it, i.e., a friend could loan the child a cell phone. It is critical that you know that contact can be made with a parent without doing it in secret.
- In some extreme cases, you may need to monitor all forms of contact to ensure a child's safety and to ensure that parents are not pressuring a child to recant. It is also possible that children who are denied contact with their parents may recant, without any influence from the parents, in order to go home. If children feel that the only way to have contact with their parents and have life return to normal is to become uncooperative in sharing information, they may do just that.
- All first contact with parents who are abusive, neglectful, or fail to protect their children must be supervised.

## **Child Behavior**

**How should I interpret a child being upset before, during, or after a visit?**

- There is little specific research and few practice tools to determine if a child's behavior is caused by visits or to suggest what actions should be taken to manage the behavior. The best way to determine what will make the visit better is to change one element of the visit at a time and track the child's behaviors.

## **Parent Encouragement**

### **Parents should want to visit their child. Why should workers have to encourage parents to attend visits?**

- Visits are awkward, intimidating, and stressful for parents. Think about how you would feel if you were separated from your children for days or weeks, your children did not know where you were or why you had gone, and a stranger would evaluate your reactions when you saw each other again. You would worry about things like, How will my children react when I see them? Will they be angry that I have been gone? Will they be happy to see me? Will they misbehave? Will the evaluator think I am acting appropriate? Parents involved with the child welfare system would feel the same way.
- Since it is in the best interests of children to maintain emotional connections with their family, you want to do all you can to make that first visit successful, so the next visit can build on that success. To improve the likelihood that parent-child visits will be successful, and possibly resolve the case more quickly, you need to encourage, support, and engage parents as much as possible.

## **Agency's Primary Focus**

### **Of course children want to visit with other people besides their parents, but the agency does not have the resources to do this. Shouldn't the agency place its primary focus on parent-child visits?**

- Parent-child visits are important but remember that it is legally mandated (H.R. 6893) for children to have visits with siblings. Although resources may be limited, it is often essential for children's well-being to have ongoing sibling contact to maintain their close connections. Other connections are important as well, and may be sustained by allowing children to remain in the same school and so they can continue their involvement in school activities, maintain friendships, call grandparents and close relatives, and continue participation in community and religious activities, etc.
- Don't try to do everything yourself. Often people the child wants to visit are appropriate to have contact with, and the supervision of an agency worker is not necessary. Identify those whom the child wants to visit (don't forget about family pets), and seek help from foster parents, coaches, religious and community leaders, and extended family members arranging visits.

## **Purpose of Visits**

### **Can more than one purpose be addressed during a single visit?**

- Yes, most visits can address two or more purposes, even using the same activities. For example, in a case in which the parent has trouble using appropriate discipline, the parent and child can play a game to help the child learn rules appropriate for the child's developmental level; the activity can be fun and thereby enhance attachment. A second purpose of demonstrating improved parenting skills can also be fulfilled. The parent can demonstrate to the worker that he or she is able to provide discipline by supplying guidance, rules or boundaries for the child during the game. The parent may also demonstrate the ability to use newly learned discipline methods.

## **Discomfort for Children**

### **How can I tell the difference between a child experiencing normal discomfort and a child who is being traumatized by a visit?**

- Be cautious about labeling a visit as traumatic. It is not always easy to determine what is adversely affecting children or what their behavior during a visit means. For some children, visits may be very distressing simply because they want to see their parents more frequently, and they may be expressing this need during visits.
- It is better for the child and parents to have a short, successful visit than to have a one-hour (or length stated in the visit plan) visit that is not successful. You or the agency representative supervising the visit should end a visit early if the child or parent appears to be having a problem with the visit that cannot be resolved at the time. You do not need to wait for a serious incident to occur in order to have a reason to end a visit.

## **Natural Locations**

### **What do you mean by natural and homelike locations?**

- Visits should be designed to mimic natural parent-child interactions. Interactions could include parents and children eating and playing together or attending religious or cultural activities together. They could also include parents attending school, medical, or after-school events. It is during these normal daily activities that bonding occurs and parents pass on culture and values.
- Visits should occur in the place the child is most comfortable. The place may be the parent's or relative's home. After the child has been in care for a while, it may be the foster home. School and other community locations can also be appropriate. When children feel comfortable in the visit setting, they are able to focus on their parents and are not worrying about the location. Parents are more likely to show up for visits that occur in these types of locations rather than visits that occur in your office. When visits are in the home, children can also see that their home has not changed and can visit with their pets.
- When both the child and parent are comfortable and in a homelike environment, it will be easier for you to assess their relationship and whether the environment plays a role in any maltreatment.
- Any location or activity that traumatizes or makes the child feel unsafe should not be used until those issues are addressed.

### **If visits are so important, why are the laws and policies not more specific about what should be done?**

- States approach child welfare law and policy from a variety of perspectives. For example, child welfare laws and policies may be written to address a specific problem that has occurred and are often written broadly in order to allow local agencies and professionals to have maximum flexibility. It is assumed that agencies and workers may provide services at a higher level that goes beyond the minimum requirement. The State law or policy requirements that parent-child visits occur monthly are considered minimal from a practice perspective. Most children will need to visit more than once a month. Agencies and professionals should ensure that visiting frequency is individualized for each child's best interests rather than simply adhering to the legally mandated minimum frequency.

## **Encouraging Visits**

### **Parents should want to seize opportunities to visit their children. Why should workers have to encourage parents to attend visits?**

- Encouraging and supporting parents to have successful visits is part of the engagement process between workers and parents that is necessary to achieve good outcomes. It is awkward to have someone else watch you interact with your child when you know that person has the responsibility to assess your parenting skills. Remember that parents are nervous about how their children may react and how they should respond and that the first visits can be the hardest for everyone. By providing support, the worker helps to ensure that parents attend visits and can have successful interactions with their children. The next visits can build on that success, and the child will be less likely to have negative reactions to the visit.

## **Behavioral Problems After a Visit**

### **A foster parent tells me that the child always exhibits behavioral problems after a visit. What should I do?**

The behaviors could be caused by many things and you should work with everyone to determine what it is.

- Talk to the child to determine what might be causing the upset. A few possible causes might be fear of the parent, desire to see the parent or other loved one more often, sadness about going back to foster care, or discomfort at the visit due to the location or activities involved. Ask the child what information s/he needs to make visits better.
- Talk to the birth parents about what might be upsetting their child in addition to the issues listed above. They know how their child normally demonstrates his/her feelings. Ask them what would comfort their child. Develop a plan with the parents to help the child handle his/her feelings and transition from the visit back to the foster home.
- Develop a relationship with the child early on so that s/he can tell you about any problems or feelings he or she is experiencing. Have a safety signal so the child can let you know if a visit needs to end early. Ask the child to help plan the visits. The child might be upset about missing school or time with friends.

There is no easy way to interpret a child's behaviors and few children can tell adults exactly why they are upset or acting out. The adults must work together to determine what is wrong and then address the issue. If you cannot determine what is causing the child's behaviors, change one aspect of the visit plan at a time until improvement is shown. Document when behavior changes occur. Remember that stopping all types of visits/contacts is seldom the correct answer.

## **Planning Conflict**

### **What does the visit planning team do if there is a conflict about what should be in the plan?**

- The primary purpose of visits is to meet the child's needs, so look at the child's needs and give them priority when making decisions. Example: A teen insists on having a visit with a parent who has been sexually abusive. The parent has not attended treatment yet. Denying the teen any contact may cause the child to attempt to have or actually have contact with the abusive parent without the knowledge of the agency or

the caregiver. Therefore, the initial visit plan might include therapeutic supervision of the contact with an expert in sex abuse. Additionally, the first contact might use letters or other contact that is not face-to-face.

## **Frequency of plan changes**

### **How frequently might a visit plan change using the progressive model?**

- It could be as quickly as each week if the parent and child are making progress. Case plans and court orders need to be written to allow for a progression to occur without the requirement of returning to court for each change. Example: in the next 3 months the visit planning goal is to move from one visit per week to three visits per week. The length of visits will begin at 1 hour and may be increased to up to 4 hours. The level of supervision is expected to remain at 'supervised' during this time period. The visits are at the foster parents' home but may be moved to other locations such as the parents' home, school or a doctor's office.
- This type of visit plan would allow the parties to know the potential range of visits. Only if the visit plan goes outside of the range would there be a need for an early court review of the plan.
- The goal is to have sufficient flexibility to move forward as quickly as possible and to ensure that, if visits were not provided as agreed, the parents and/or child/youth could ask for a review of the plan.
- Case plans should include specific descriptions of what behaviors are desired/expected and what might cause the visit plan to be altered.

## **Visit Location**

### **Should visits really occur in the parents' home very early in the case?**

- Yes, it is possible that some or all of the very first visits can occur in the parents' home. This allows children to gather their belongings, see that their parents are okay, say goodbye to pets, etc. Another advantage is that the worker is more likely to see how the family normally interacts. Of course, no visit would occur in a home where there are safety issues. The practice of waiting until reunification services are almost completed before allowing children to return home for visits can cause problems. Children can feel abandoned or lose their connection to their home even if they regularly see their parents and family. Visits that always occur in environments that do not represent the reality to live together safely in their own home. No matter when the first visit at the home occurs, the worker and parents must address the question the child will have about why she must return to foster care following the visit.

## **Confidential Information**

### **How much information about the parents can be shared with foster parents and visit supervisor? For instance, can information regarding parents' services and training for such things as mental health and addiction issues and parenting skills, as well as rules around visits, be shared with foster parents and visit supervisors? What is confidential?**

- Workers should follow their agency's confidentiality rules. However, when the visit plan is developed using different forms of family meeting models, it is possible to gain approval from the parents and other parties to share information. Persons providing supervised visiting services, whether an agency employee,

contractual service provider, or foster caregiver, must have access to all relevant information concerning the child and the family. The person supervising the visit must know about a parent's addiction or mental health issues in order to recognize the signs of severe stress, and be able to intervene before a problem occurs. Foster parents, supervisors of visits, or other teaching and modeling parenting skills need to know the specific skills being taught in parenting classes or therapy sessions. Everyone MUST know the visit rules and boundaries and why they exist. Since it is not possible to write out every possible situation and appropriate response, the visit supervisor must know the critical information about the parents and child.