



**National Resource Center for  
Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning**  
*at the Hunter College School of Social Work*

# *INFORMATION PACKET*

## *Parent–Child Visiting*

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### **Summary: Parent and Child Visiting**

While children are in foster care, visitation with parents is widely recognized as a vital tool for promoting timely reunification (Davis, Landsverk, Newton & Ganager, 1996). Regular visitation helps children maintain continuity of family relationships, fosters a more positive parent-child relationship, and helps families prepare to reunite. Visitation helps children adapt to being in care, cope with feelings of loss and abandonment, and improve overall emotional wellbeing (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978). For reunified children, regular parent-child visiting while children were in care correlates with an increased likelihood of lasting reunification (Farmer, 1996).

In addition to its use as an intervention to promote reunification, parent-child visitation also serves other purposes within the child welfare system. Often, caseworkers use supervised visits as an assessment and monitoring tool by to determine if the parent is improving their parenting skills and if reunification is the appropriate permanency goal. The caseworker's role as monitor may deter from time and energy spent on activities to fully promoting visitation as a permanency planning intervention, such as fostering a welcoming environment, providing visit coaching, and planning with parents prior to visits. Families may also be uncomfortable being monitored, which undermines positive parent-child interactions during visits (Haight, Black, Mangelsdorf, et al. 2001).

States have widely varying policies on frequency of visiting, whether visits are generally supervised or unsupervised, and other areas (Hess, 2003b). Researchers and recent Child and Family Service Reviews alike have found that state policies do not do enough to ensure that children in care visit regularly and consistently with their parents (Hess, 2003b and 2005, National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning [NRCFCPPP],

2008). Further, agency constraints including overstretched caseworkers also negatively impact the use of visitation as a permanency intervention and the frequency of parent-child visiting (Hess, 1988).

### **Parent-Child Visitation: Facts and Statistics**

- The chances for reunification for children in care increase tenfold when mothers visit regularly as recommended by the court (Davis et al. 1996).
- Children who visit frequently with their parents experience shorter stays in out-of-home placements (Mech, 1985).
- Frequent visiting prior to family reunification increases the chances that reunification will be lasting (Farmer, 1996).
- Frequent parent-child visiting while children are in care promotes child wellbeing and positive adjustment to placement (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978).
- In addition to serving as a reunification tool, visitation is also a useful intervention for children whose permanency goal is adoption. Maine's visitation policy states that in such cases visitation offers the chance for child and parent to say goodbye, for the parent to communicate responsibility for the behavior that makes reunification not feasible, and for the parent to support the child as they transition to a new family (Hess, 2003b).
- A Georgia study found that only 12.7% of mothers and 5.6% of fathers visited with children in care at least once every two weeks during an 18-month period (Hess, 2003a).
- The frequency of parent-child visitation has been found to be higher when children are in kinship care as opposed to traditional foster care (Davis, et al. 1996).
- Some authors suggest that the environment in which visits take place is crucial to supporting positive parent-child interactions (Haight, Black, Workman & Tata, 2001). Accordingly,

some states promote visits in home-like settings and discourage visitation in agency settings (Hess, 2003b).

- Federal Child and Family Service Reviews found that 20 states did not demonstrate strength in the area of *Facilitating Visitation of Children in Care with Parents and Siblings* (NRCFCPPP, 2008).

### **Review of Policies and Legislation**

- Family reunification is emphasized in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. The Act mandates that when children are removed from their parents, foster care placements must be as close as possible to the parent's home to allow for continuity of the parent-child relationship. The use of visitation as a permanency intervention increased after the act's passage (Hess, 2005).
- The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) states that child safety is the core priority for the child welfare system. It limits on the amount of time children may spend in care before reunification, adoption or another planned permanent living arrangement occurs. Though the Act does not specifically target visitation, its timeframes for permanency may encourage agencies to look further at the use of visitation as a permanency tool.
- A survey of state visitation policy by Hess (2003b) received responses from 37 of 50 states. Of states who responded, the following was found:
  - 78.4% required a written visitation plan
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  - 73% addressed who may take part in visits with children in care
  - 70% addressed the frequency of visits

- 70% addressed visit frequency. Of these: nine required that visits take place weekly, six required biweekly visits, and four only required monthly visits. Seven stated that visits should take place “regularly” or “as frequently as possible.”
- 62.2% addressed agency/caseworker responsibilities
- 56.8% addressed circumstances which may lead to limiting or terminating visits
- 54% addressed where visits should take place
- 51.4% required visits between siblings in care

### **Parent-Child Visiting: Best Practices and Model Programs**

**Best Practices for State Policy:** Hess (2003b) asserts that states should develop comprehensive visitation guidelines that include the following: the purposes of visitation, written plans for parent-child and sibling visitation, who may participate in visits, frequency of visitation, responsibilities, right to contact, when and where visits may occur, how soon after placement visits should occur, if visits are supervised and by whom, visiting activities and durations, and guidelines for situations such as parental incarceration, domestic violence or sexual abuse.

**Model Programs: Settings for Visits:** Home-like and other supportive settings are preferable (Haight et al. 2001). One example is Family Connections Reunity House, a therapeutic supervised visitation program in New Jersey. The site is a converted house which, in addition to visiting rooms, also includes full apartments in which families can engage in routine home activities like cooking together. The program features three phases, and the duration of visits increases as families progress through the phases. In the final phase, families may have overnight visits (Hess, 2005). Another innovative supervised visitation program is Families Together, a program of the Providence Children’s Museum in Rhode Island. In this family-appropriate and

welcoming setting, parents and children can enjoy the museum and take part in play activities under the supervision of family therapists (Hess, 2005).

**Model Programs: Inclusive Practice:** The effectiveness of *inclusive practice* has been suggested, although not fully demonstrated, by Leathers (2002). Results suggest that visiting in the parent or foster parent's home (rather than an agency or other non-homelike setting) and maternal participation in case conferences and child care activities are associated with increased frequency of visiting, which in turn increases the prospects for reunification. In this model, foster parents serve as role models for birth parents, parents continue to be strongly involved in the direct care of their child, and the child experiences less disruption (Leathers, 2002)

### **Parent-Child Visiting: Web Sites and Resources**

- **Child Welfare Information Gateway.** A service of the Children's Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Child Welfare Information Gateway offers overviews of a wide range of child welfare topics, information, research, and statistics. Information on visiting is available within the Achieving and Maintaining Permanency topic's section on reunification at the following link: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/permanency/reunification/>
- **Supervised Visitation Network.** A membership organization for professionals providing visitation services to families, the Supervised Visitation Network's website offers information, training resources, a section for parents, a directory of providers, and updates on conferences and training. The website is: <http://www.svnetwork.net/>

- **Clearinghouse on Supervised Visitation of the Institute for Family Violence of Florida State University.** Resources include information for supervised visitation professionals, information for judges, and an overview of supervised visitation statutes in all 50 fifty states, as well as domestic violence information and resources. The website is:  
<http://familyvio.csw.fsu.edu/CHV.php>
- **Child Welfare League of America.** Contains information on research, advocacy, best practices and standards in the child welfare field. Information is available on family-child visiting and other elements of family reunification. The website is: <http://www.cwla.org/>

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