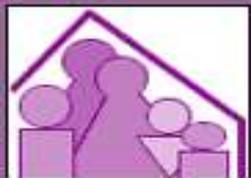


Visiting the Heart of Reunification

Technical Assistance for Thibodeaux
Region

DCFS – State of Louisiana



**National Resource Center for
Permanency and Family Connections**
at the Hunter College School of Social Work



Key skills & competencies:

- *As a result of participating in this session, participants will be able to:*
 - *Determine the core purposes of parenting time/visiting for various case situations*
 - *Assist parents in planning for visits/parenting time with their children*
 - *Provide concrete suggestions to parents on things to do to strengthen their relationships with their child(ren)*

Key skills & competencies:

- *Set up visits so that parents have an opportunity to practice skills and behaviors needed to reduce risk and increase safety*
- *Facilitate separation and loss issues felt by parents and children as a result of placement*
- *Assess the relationship between parents and children through coaching and feedback*
- *Facilitate the role of resource (foster) parents in parent-child visits/parenting time*

Visits

Family visits may be valuable opportunities for children to heal and cope with the trauma of being separated from their families while in foster care.

In fact, regular visiting can help children maintain continuity in family relationships, create a more positive parent-child relationship, and help families prepare to reunite.

Given this, the quality of contact between children in care and their parents over the last 20 years has received much more attention.

Visits

This focus, however, has not resulted in much evidence-based information on guidelines or standardized tests on what to look for during visits nor criteria for evaluating what happens during visits.

Given the primary goal of reunification with birth parents, visiting becomes the main vehicle for observing parental behaviors and therefore merits attention. The needs of the child must be at the forefront, while ensuring their safety.

Visits between parents and their children can:

- Provide parents with an opportunity to learn new parenting skills, practice new skills and/or demonstrate safe parenting skills.
- Increase the mutual enjoyment for parents and children during their interactions.
- Give the case worker an opportunity to observe and assess families and their progress.
- Support/satisfy reasonable efforts requirements.
- Promote child welfare system goals of safety, child well being and permanency.

Research shows

- That children who have regular, frequent contact with their family while in foster care experience:
 - A greater likelihood of reunification
 - Shorter stays in out-of-home care
 - Increased chances that the reunification will be lasting
 - Overall improved emotional well being and positive adjustment to placement

Weintraub, 2008

If you had an extended hospital stay, what would be the ideal visiting/parenting time plan between you and your children?



Describe your agency's typical visiting situation:

- Purpose:
- Location:
- Time/length:
- Who is there?
- What happens?



Visiting Space



- Is it welcoming?
- How would your own child react?

Purpose:

- The primary purpose of visiting is to allow children to preserve relationships with people who are important to them.

Broad purposes of visiting:

- Promoting Family Connections
- Assessment
- Treatment
- Documentation

- Without visiting, abilities and desires are abstract and therefore unclear -- it is easy for both parents and children to fantasize and to deny reality.
- Parents and children must experience being together to be able to determine for themselves if reunification is possible.

Conditions That Optimize Visiting

- Caseworkers must be committed to visiting
- Caseworkers must have empathy for parents
- Caregivers (foster parents) must be committed to visiting
- Foster parents must not be overburdened.

- Children must be placed near their parents' home
- Siblings must be placed together
- Agency policy must require written plans for frequent visits.
- Researchers have found that the more frequently parents visit, the higher the probability of reunification
- Agency resources must promote visiting

Parenting time/visiting is a right of parents and children.

- It should never be used as a reward or a punishment.
- It is normal for visiting to be painful.
- It should be more frequent at the beginning and at the end of placement.
- It can only be terminated or limited by court order when it can be demonstrated that visits are harmful (Vs painful) to the child.
- If anyone is intoxicated, violent , threatening, coercive or under the influence of drugs during a visit -- that particular visit may be terminated.

Grief vs. Trauma

- If it appears that the child is reacting to the pain of separation, you might consider increasing frequency of visits.
- Frequent visits more easily become part of a child's routine and are therefore less disruptive.



Harmful?

- Does the child visibly cringe at a parent's touch?
- Is there physical evidence of abuse?
- Do the behaviors described persist for days after the visit and interfere with functioning?
- What does the child say when describing the visit?

What are the specific purposes of parenting time/visiting between parents and children?

1. Maintain and strengthen their relationship
2. Practice skills and behaviors needed to reduce risk and increase safety
3. Facilitate separation and loss issues experienced by parents and children
4. Increase the likelihood a child will return home
5. Observe parent- child interactions
6. Share information between parent & foster parent ; catching up on what is happening with the child

Development of Visiting Plans

Visiting should be part of a larger case plan and strategy for working with a family.

It should mesh with the other services that are part of the case plan.

Services ordered should center around parent-child visits, which provide the opportunity to test the effectiveness of these services and parents can demonstrate an increased ability and willingness to parent (Wright, 2001).

Guiding principles to develop child visiting plans:

1. Child development and parenting skill acquisition are kept in mind and supported.
2. Family culture should be respected and encouraged.
3. Type of abuse will dictate level of supervision needed.
4. Inclusion of siblings as often as possible.
5. Time in care: visits supervision, frequency and length should change as the family makes progress.
6. Other factors to consider: parental mental illness and/ or substance abuse, incarceration, domestic violence history.

Key Elements of the Visiting Plan

- Frequency
- Length
- Location
- Supervision
- Participants
- Supportive Services
- Activities
- Conditions

Is the space conducive to positive parenting time?



Is the location “normal”?



- McDonald's is the largest visiting center in the country.
- Is that where you would spend most of your parenting time with your child?

Helping parents to plan visits/parenting time with their children to:

1. Strengthen their relationship

- take photos
- make an audio tape together
- tell positive family stories
- play games together
- fix child's hair
- bring in meal/snacks
- bring clothes
- do lessons/homework
- reduce/eliminate distractions
- help parent and child to talk/play
- Use Skype if you cannot visit in person

Family Relationships and Interactions

- What visit arrangements will maintain or build relationships?
- What visiting options will minimize stress and conflict?
- What arrangements will increase parent-child interactions?
- How can the family's social support network be tapped?

What about developmental considerations? How much time should this mother and baby spend with each other?

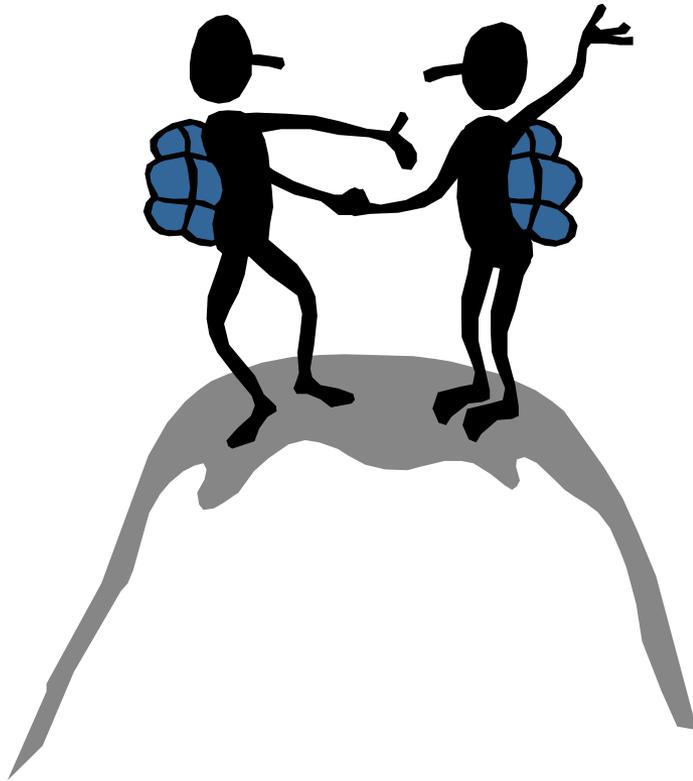


Helping parents to plan visits/parenting time with their children to:

2. Practice skills and behaviors needed to reduce risk and increase safety

- feeding child
- grooming the child
- practicing discipline skills
- providing structure
- say positive things to the child
- demonstrate affection and caring
- help child with homework
- identify and practice specific behaviors
- allow the parent to deal with real issues
- intervene to redirect risky or unsafe behavior

Consider the journey of families



- Grief/Loss/Change
- Visit Coaching
- Supervised Visits
- Frequency of Visits

Issues and challenges



- How do we involve fathers?

Helping parents to plan visits/parenting time with their children to:

3. Facilitate separation and loss issues experienced by parents and children

- Bring family momentos or “transitional” object to each visit
- take photos
- make something together
- use story-telling
- celebrate holidays, birthdays
- establish a visit ritual/song/story
- Use Skype if distance is an issue
- *Create memories*
- coach parent to not make promises
- help parent to express feelings before and after visit
- reduce/eliminate distractions

Issues and complexities:

- How do we do it -
- with all of our
other
responsibilities?



Helping parents to plan visits/parenting time with their children to:

4. Increase the likelihood a child will return home

- commit to frequent and long visits/parenting time
- engage in normal people “keeping in touch” between visits
- attend school and medical appointments, etc.
- arrange a visit ASAP after placement
- give positive feedback as often as possible
- allow visiting in foster home, when appropriate
- arrange weekend parenting time and ask for parents plans for the weekend

Helping parents to plan visits/parenting time with their children to:

5. Observe/Coach parent-child interactions

- act as natural as possible
- design the visit/parenting time to demonstrate areas addressed in the service plan
- ask for feedback from the worker
- let parents know what you are hoping to observe
- ask parent to assess the visit
- Coach interactions that are not positive to expected behavior
- give parent immediate and honest feedback

Issues and challenges?



- What about sibling visits?
- Why are they so important?
- Sasha's Story

Preparation for the visit/parenting time:

- Ask the parent, “What do you want to get out of this visit?”
- What are some things you plan to do during your visit?
- How much time would you like to spend with your child?
- Where would you like the visit to take place?
- How do you think your last visit went?
- What are some things you would like to talk with your child about?

Coaching Visits: Is the parent changing and is the relationship with the child getting stronger?

Preparation:

**Always keep the service plan and risk elements in mind -
- as well as the reason the child was placed**

- Is the parent actively engaging the child?
- Is the parent responsive and protective of the child?
- What are the parents responses to the child?
- Is the parent prepared?
- How does the child respond to the parent?
- What can you do to coach this visit to make it more productive for the family?
- Do you notice changes from visit to visit?

What would be an ideal visit/parenting time for a specific family (think of a family you are working with or an example the facilitator provides)

- Who would be there?
- Where would the visit be held?
- How would the visit/parenting time begin? What would the parents do with the children?
- What would they be saying to each other?
- What skills would the parent be practicing?
- What rituals would exist for the visit?
- How would the visit end?
- How would you and the parent assess the visit?

Worker do's and don'ts

- Do work proactively with parents and foster parents to make visits successful.
- Suggest to parents things they may want to practice in their visits
- Have an activities bag ready if the parent is not prepared
- Share your observations with the parent -- encourage self-assessment – use coaching methods
- Do help with beginnings and endings
- Do help parent and child to look ahead to the next visit
- **Don't carry out business with the parent during their visit -- it is their very precious time together**
- Don't interject yourself in the visit unless you need to provide redirection

The role of foster parents in visiting:

- How can foster parents be engaged in facilitating visiting?
- Can foster parents be trained to coach visits?
- How can we utilize foster parents to be the “bridge” from foster parents to birth families?
- Virginia Model of Birth/Foster Family Support – see www.nrcpfc.org teleconference series

Assessing foster parent's capacity to foster parenting time:

- What are their attitudes toward parents?
- What is the foster parent's capacity to be empathic to the birth parents?
- Do they value the child/parent relationship?

How can they appropriately engage with child's parents?

- Can they objectively record visit interactions?
- Can they intervene as necessary?
- Will they maintain confidentiality?
- What are their resources & support?

What does it mean?

- If parents are late for a visit?
- If parents miss a visit?
- If foster parents are late in arriving at the visit?



Can you imagine being separated from your child or parent and only being able to visit from two to eight hours a month?

Web Resources by NRCPFC

Read the materials on the NRCPFC website Hot Topic Page on Visiting at:

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/family-child-visiting.html

View the Webcast on A Conversation with Peg Hess on Visiting at:

<http://www.nrcpfc.org/webcasts/archive2.html#15>

View the Webcast on the Virginia Foster Parent-Birth Parent Visiting Program at:

<http://www.nrcpfc.org/webcasts/archive2.html#18>

View the Webcast with Marty Beyer on Visit Coaching at:

<http://www.nrcpfc.org/webcasts/archive2.html#20>

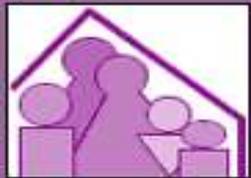
Resources:

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- Wentz, R. (2008, October 18) Best Practices in Dependency: Planned, Purposeful, and Progressive visiting. Podcast retrieved from <http://www.uwtv.org/programs/displayevent.aspx?rID=27405>.
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