Children's Services
PRACTICE NOTES
For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers
From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

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Children's Services Practice Notes is a newsletter for North Carolina's child welfare workers produced four times a year by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the N.C. Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families and the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In summarizing recent research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.

Let us hear from you!
If you would like to comment about something that appears in this or any other issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes*, please do so! Address your comments to:

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IN THIS ISSUE: PARENT-CHILD VISITS

Visitation can be a place where the system breaks down. Birth parents may have little understanding of how important frequent and successful visits are to their children, DSS, and the courts. As a result, they may permanently lose custody of their kids, who themselves may experience long foster care stays.

Foster parents, too, may not fully understand the importance of visits, or they may feel unprepared to help children afterwards. Feeling unsupported, they may even quit fostering.

Yet the opposite can happen. Trained, committed foster parents can reassure birth parents and foster children. Guided by social workers and motivated by a clear understanding of the consequences, birth parents can demonstrate improvements during frequent visits with their kids. As a result, children can be returned sooner to safer, healthier families.

Visits are a critical part of child welfare, a part clearly related to our goals of stable foster care placements and timely, permanent outcomes for children.

We hope this issue of *Practice Notes* helps you, as a child welfare social worker, use your significant influence to make the most of parent-child visits. ◆

MAKING THE MOST OF VISITATION

Visits have been called "the heart of reunification."

Virtually everyone who studies or is involved in child welfare agrees: Visits between children and their parents matter.

They matter because they help maintain relationships within the birth family, empower birth parents, help birth family members face reality, and allow birth family members to learn and practice new skills and behaviors. They matter because they give social workers a chance to assess and document birth family progress (Hess & Mintun, 1992).

Visits matter because they help children express their feelings and relate better to foster parents, calm some of children's separation fears, and give foster children and foster parents continuing opportunities to see the parents realistically (Cantos & Gries, 1997).

Perhaps most important of all, visits matter because continued contact with parents increases the probability that children will go home to their families (Simms & Bolden, 1991). Indeed, visits have been called the "heart of reunification" (Hess & Proch, 1992).

Visits are not, however, a magic bullet that guarantee positive outcomes. Sometimes the mere fact that a parent makes an effort to visit her child is interpreted as proof of a strong parent-child bond, cont. page 2

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which may in turn result in a premature decision in favor of reunification (Simms & Bolden, 1991). Additionally, recidivism continues to persist in foster care—30 percent of the children reunited with their birth families later return to foster care due to further abuse (Spaid, 1996).

Therefore, social workers need to know about parent-child visits. Specifically, they need to know why they are good for families, and they need to know how to facilitate and document them in a way that enhances the stability of foster care placements and promotes timely, permanent outcomes for children.

VISIT FREQUENCY COUNTS

The frequency of parent-child visits has a lot to do with how children view their parents, how well they adapt to foster care, and how long they are in care.

Perceptions of Birth Parents. Researchers Kufeldt and Armstrong (1995) found that the foster children whose birth parents visited at least once a week tended to rate their parents as normal or healthy. In contrast, this same study found that children who were deprived of contact with their birth parents and wanted additional visits rated their parents as problematic. Children who saw their parents less than once a month felt they suffered as a result of not maintaining contact with their birth parents (Kufeldt & Armstrong, 1995).

Adapting to Foster Care. The frequency with which they visit their parents also seems to affect foster children's behavior. Researchers Cantos and Gries (1997) studied 49 foster children and found that children who were visited frequently (either once a week or once every two weeks) exhibited fewer behavioral problems than children who were visited infrequently (once a month or less) or not at all. Overall, children who had frequent contact with their parents showed less anxiety and depression than children whose parents' visits were either infrequent or nonexistent (Cantos & Gries, 1997).

Permanency Outcomes. Frequency of visits also appears to affect what ultimately happens to families. White and colleagues (1996) examined 41 closed case records of children under 10 years of age who had been in custody of the Nevada Division of Child and Family Services. The study examined visit frequency, location, and social worker activity for each of the cases. White and colleagues found that children in care for less than 20 months received twice as many visits from their parents than children who were in care over 20 months. This suggests that more frequent parent-child visitation may be associated with shorter foster care stays.

Parent-Social Worker Contact. White and colleagues also found an interesting relationship between the frequency of contacts social workers had with parents and how often parents saw their children. Parents of children in care less than 20 months had 2.49 contacts with their social worker per month, compared to 1.55 contacts per month for parents of children in care greater than 20 months. This seems to suggest that social workers have some influence over visitation patterns and, indirectly, family outcomes.

FACILITATING VISITS

Many agencies are well-equipped to establish and facilitate visitation programs. However, some are not. Following are some suggestions for assessing and enhancing visitation in your agency and practice.

The foundation of a successful visitation program is the people who establish and monitor visits— cont. page 3

CONDITIONS THAT OPTIMIZE VISITING

- Social worker is committed to visiting
- Social worker has empathy for parents
- Foster parents/kin are committed to visiting
- Agency requires written plans for frequent visits
- Agency resources promote visiting; this includes a room with comfortable furniture and games or other activities for families

(Hess & Proch, 1988)

SUGGESTIONS FOR VISITATION

Here are some ideas for making visits fun for children, valuable assessment tools for social workers, and positive learning experiences for parents.

- Hold visits in the foster home
- Share lunch with children at school or day care
- Include parents on doctor or dentist visits
- Have visits in the child's own home
- Conduct visits at a relative's home
- Involve the therapist
- Have visits outside the agency at parks, playgrounds, libraries, museums, or fast-food restaurants
- Train volunteers or casework aides to be "visitation specialists" who can monitor, mentor, and provide transportation
- Encourage parents to attend the child's school functions, such as parties, plays, or concerts
- Tailor plans to the interests of children and birth parents; they may have common activities/interests that facilitate positive interactions

Sources: Flick, 1999; Loar, 1998

these individuals must be properly informed about the benefits of visitation and trained about visitation procedures (Perkins & Ansay, 1998).

The first step in facilitating visitation should be to set up a regular, written visitation schedule. Written schedules encourage birth parents to adhere to the visitation plan and often lead to more visits (Perkins & Ansay, 1998). Since they are essential to visits, birth and foster parents should be directly involved in setting up visitation schedules. Involving them and respecting their preferences for visit times and locations demonstrates to parents that they are important members of the team.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that when the first visit is held immediately following placement (within 48 hours), birth parents may be more likely to show up for visits and more inclined to see their value (Gallimore, 2000).

Successful visitation also relies on accurate assessment of birth parents' strengths and needs. In *Making Visits Work*, Loar (1998) points out that most visitation plans assume that birth parents understand what their child goes through if they don't show up for a visit, and that parents have leisure and recreation skills independent of drugs, alcohol, sex, danger, and violence. Other common assumptions are that birth parents know how to:

- Play with their children
- Talk politely with their children
- Enjoy their children's company
- Separate from the visit their frustration, shame, and humiliation over losing custody
- Read to children or read and understand court reports, contracts, priorities, major and minor requirements

Yet these assumptions do not always hold true. By overestimating parents' abilities, visitation planners can unwittingly undermine family reunification (Loar, 1998).

Another important step is communicating about the visitation plan to all interested parties. This includes ensuring foster parents know the visitation schedule and what is expected of them, explaining visitation procedures and activities to birth parents, and informing foster children that visits will be only temporary reunions with family (Kessler & Greene, 1999). For more suggestions, see "Checklist for Facilitating Visits."

Finally, merely providing families with an empty office in which to meet is seldom enough. At the very least, visiting rooms should contain comfortable furniture, games, and toys. Loar (1998) suggests tailoring visitation plans to the interests of children and birth parents; they may have common activities/interests that facilitate positive interactions (Loar, 1998).

DOCUMENTING VISITS

Regardless of how they go, it is important to comprehensively document visits. "Accurate and descriptive documentation of visitation patterns and progress serves the dual purpose of providing clear evidence for discharge or termination of parental rights" (Wattenberg, 1997).

Flick (1999) suggests visit documentation should include information about:

- Who participated and what activities took place
- The time the parent arrived and the length of the visit
- The interactions between the participants (level of affection)
- The extent to which the parent exercised his or her role (setting limits, disciplining child, paying attention to child)
- Whether the social worker needed to intervene

cont. page 8

CHECKLIST FOR FACILITATING VISITS

Planning the visit

- Contact parents and arrange/confirm date, time, and location of visit
- Identify whether visit will be supervised or unsupervised and explain why
- Identify minimum parenting standard to be addressed and activity to occur pertinent to parenting standard
- Prepare or ask parent to prepare other siblings still at home for visit
- Arrange/confirm date, time, location of visit >24 hours before visit
- Arrange/confirm transportation arrangements
- Prepare or ask foster parent to prepare child for visit

Conducting the visit

- Remind parent why visit is supervised; review visit progress
- Review purpose of visit and relevance of planned activity; specify what is expected of parents and children during activity
- Explain caseworker's role in visit

Ending the visit

- Briefly review overall progress in activity and its relevance to critical area
- Comment favorably on some aspect of child's and parent's performances
- Make suggestions for improvement as necessary
- Arrange/confirm date, time, status, and location of next visit
- Identify minimum parenting standard to address and activity for next week
- Record specifics of visit

Source: Kessler & Greene, 1999, pp.160-161

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VISITATION AND CONCURRENT PLANNING

Concurrent planning is the process of working toward family reunification while, at the same time, developing an alternative permanent plan. Developed to prevent foster care drift in very young, chronically neglected children from multi-need families, this procedure has been used successfully with all kinds of families.

The frequency and relative success of visits provides evidence either for reunification or for movement toward plan "B."

Today, concurrent planning is a standard part of how things are done in child welfare in North Carolina. Our State formally adopted this practice in 1998, in part because the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 highlighted concurrent planning as an appropriate practice to help assure timely permanence for children (Katz, 1999). Concurrent planning also fits naturally with North Carolina's goal of achieving a permanent home for all children within one year of their entry into foster care.

THE ROLE OF PARENT-CHILD VISITS

Parental visitation plays an important part in concurrent planning. Visitation patterns give everyone involved in a family's case—social workers, children, and the child's parents—an idea of how the family is progressing. Seen this way, visitation is a diagnostic tool. The frequency and relative success of visits between parents and children can provide evidence either for early reunification or for movement toward the alternative plan, be it adoption, guardianship, or custody.

Regular visits for those children headed towards reunification can complement the parents' progress. Visits are a good opportunity for parents to show their motivation for getting their children back home and exhibiting new skills or behavior changes.

On the other hand, by scheduling visits social workers can document that visits have not been denied and provide occasions to document parental disinterest in the child, which can lead to timely termination of parental rights and subsequent efforts to achieve permanence.

Thus, in many cases, visitation is a key determinant in the case outcome. For this reason, social workers and their supervisors should use their influence to promote frequent parent-child visits.

INFLUENCING THE FREQUENCY OF VISITS

Social workers can do three things to promote frequent parent-child visits. The first is to try to schedule visits for times and locations that work for all the parties involved—the birth parents, foster parents, children, and, if applicable, the social worker or person monitoring the visit.

When setting up the visitation schedule for families, try to schedule as many visits as the parents and other parties can reasonably attend. Because it places emphasis on making a case decision within one year, concurrent planning generates more urgency about scheduling frequent visits.

The second thing social workers can do to promote visitation is to strategically recruit, select, and cont. page 5

VISITS ARE A CRUCIAL PART OF THE PRINCIPLES OF CONCURRENT PLANNING

1. **Differential Assessment/Diagnosis**: After evaluation of family strengths/resources, all families in North Carolina are given a concurrent plan.
2. **Full Disclosure**: Tell parents about concurrent plan (as well as urgency of reunification and detrimental effects of out-of-home care). The families' options are thoroughly and repeatedly reviewed with them in an open, honest manner.
3. **Visitation**: "Vigorous efforts are made to institute frequent parental visiting, *even with ambivalent or unresponsive parents*. The agency's zeal in promoting visiting will result in either faster reunification or early decision-making in favor of an alternative permanent plan" (Katz, 1999). "Accurate and descriptive documentation of visitation patterns and progress serves the dual purpose of providing clear evidence for discharge or termination of parental rights" (Wattenberg, 1997).
4. **Plan A and Plan B**: Have an alternate plan if reunification does not occur. Start an early search for immediate and extended relatives. Identify relatives or foster families ready to adopt, become guardians, or accept custody of the children involved.
5. **Written Agreement and Time Line**: Outline short-term goals and long-term permanency goals and highlight how visitation fits in the picture. Adhere to and make sure families are informed of time lines and expectations. Draw parents/relatives into case planning early and clarify time lines as needed. Parents should have an overall case plan in small steps that can be documented to evaluate progress.
6. **Behavior, Not Promises**: Make it clear to parents that what matters is what they do, not what they say they will do. Documented behaviors are the only evidence that can be reported in court. Make sure there is accurate and descriptive documentation while tracking actual events—describe what the parents did.
7. **Forensic Social Work**: Legally sound casework/case planning supports concise court reports and competent testimony.
8. **Success Redefined**: Primary goal is *timely permanency*, with family reunification as the first, but not the only, option.

(Source: Katz, L. (1999). Concurrent planning: Benefits and pitfalls. *Child Welfare, 78*(1), 71–87.)

train a pool of **foster parents** who can support the goals and tolerate the uncertainties of concurrent planning. During training and when children are placed in their homes, social workers can help support foster/adopt families by having open, honest discussions with them about the risk they are taking by agreeing to be "Plan B" (adoptive parents, guardians, or custodians) when "Plan A" (reunification) has not been ruled out.

Social workers should emphasize that the level of "risk" for the relatives or foster parents is not quantifiable. They should also make certain foster parents understand how visits fit with concurrent planning and why they are important. Without foster parent support, visits (and therefore concurrent planning itself) may be less successful.

The third thing social workers can do to promote visitation is to have frequent and quality contact with the birth parents. In *Factors in Length of Foster Care: Worker Activities and Parent-Child Visitation*, White, Albers, and Bitonti (1996) found a link between how often social workers saw birth parents and how often those parents saw their children. This same study also found a link between the frequency of visits and the length of time children spent in foster care: frequent visits seem to be tied to shorter stays in out-of-home care.

Supervisors can support social workers in their efforts to promote visitation by helping them examine their personal experiences and biases toward visit planning. Supervisors can also help social workers ensure "that visiting plans are individualized and that the opportunities provided for parent-child contact exceed the minimum required whenever indicated" (Hess, 1988). With their social workers, supervisors should carefully explore any plans for using visits "to reward parent progress or to test parental interest" (Hess, 1988).

In addition to monitoring the activities of individual workers, supervisors should assess whether their agency as a whole systematically promotes frequent visitation (White, Albers, & Bitonti, 1996).

Although social workers' and supervisors' roles in visitation cannot be underestimated, they are not the only ones who affect the frequency of visits. Courts also exert considerable influence in this area. For example, the courts in Santa Clara County, California order that parents visit their children two to three times a week in order to maintain bonds. This puts considerable pressure on the social workers and foster parents to keep up with the visitation pace (Wattenberg, 1997).

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

In order to practice concurrent planning in a legal, honest, fair, and effective manner, certain mistakes related to visitation must be avoided:

There's a link between how much contact you have with parents and how often they visit their kids.

1. **Equating concurrent planning with adoption and therefore minimizing reunification efforts.** This can lead caseworkers to schedule fewer visits.
2. **Assuming assessment tools will infallibly predict case outcomes.** This may lead to minimizing reunification efforts and decreasing visitations. Ultimately, the child's parents will support or prove wrong the assessed placement outcome.
3. **Investing in a particular outcome.** Allow the case to evolve from the family's decisions and actions.
4. **Designing case plans that are not family-centered.** Put another way, the agency takes on responsibility for things the parents should be doing. Parents have both rights and responsibilities. Concurrent planning supports their active role in visitation, engaging in services, and planning for their child's future.
5. **Offering foster parents and relatives an estimate of "legal risk."** Let the adults take the risks, not the children. Acknowledge that foster/adopt parents are taking on the role of "Plan B" and still supporting parental visitation. This is not easy. Encourage foster/adopt parents to become involved in parent-child visits to promote more supportive relationships with biological parents.
6. **Interpreting 12 months as an absolute limit on reunification, regardless of parental progress.** "There is a fine line between the judicious use of time limits to prevent foster care drift, and a rote enforcement that ignores the full picture of parental motivation, effort, incremental progress, and a foreseeable reunification" (Katz, 1999). ◆

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INVOLVED FOSTER PARENTS CAN BE CRUCIAL TO SUCCESSFUL VISITS

When it comes to the issue of visitation and foster care, the focus often centers on the needs of children and biological parents. Frequency of visitation is an important factor in determining reunification, so it is logical that the needs of children and biological parents are most commonly considered.

Encourage and appreciate foster parents for supporting visits and working with birth parents.

Unfortunately, this can leave foster caregivers on their own to contend with the complex issues surrounding parent-child visits. These issues include the foster parents' feelings of anger toward birth parents, dealing with visit-related upheaval in the child's emotions and behavior, scheduling and logistical challenges, and meeting the needs of the visiting child and others in the home. In fact, without adequate involvement, education, and support, foster parents may be uncommitted to parent-child visits. In the worst cases, their attitude or actions may even undermine the success of visits or lead to disruption of the foster placement.

Yet the opposite is also true. Foster parents who understand the purpose and process of visitation and who see themselves as part of a team of professionals contribute to visits by:

- Helping prepare children for visits
- Comforting, reassuring, and talking with children following a visit
- Providing transportation to and from visits
- Allowing visits to take place in their homes
- Building birth parents' confidence and supporting their efforts to change by accepting them and treating them with respect
- Modeling healthy parent-child interactions and teaching proper child care to birth parents
- Providing information and being a link to the social worker and, in some cases,
- Monitoring visits

To ensure the foster parents they work with contribute to visits in these ways, social workers need to know how to give them adequate support.

SUPPORTING FOSTER PARENTS

Foster parents and kin caregivers can most fully support visitation when they see themselves as part of the team serving the child and family. This perspective is brought about through ongoing education and by involving foster parents as professionals and colleagues (Brown & Calder, 1999; Denby, Rindfleisch & Bean, 1998).

ONGOING EDUCATION

One of the best ways to support foster and kin caregivers is to make sure they understand their role. To do this, it is important to build on and reinforce what foster parents learn in their required preservice training. This may include sponsoring local workshops, directing foster parents to helpful books, or facilitating their attendance at in-service training events such as *Finding Teaching Moments*, that are described in the N.C. Division of Social Services' training calendar.

Interaction with social workers is also an important source of information for foster parents. During informal discussions, particularly with new foster parents or those who do not appear to appreciate the benefits of visitation, social workers should help foster parents to:

- Understand the benefits of visitation to children
- See how their active participation in the visitation process may help children and their families
- Recognize that despite being challenging, children's negative behaviors or withdrawal following visits indicates healthy attachment and distress over separation and are not necessarily indications that the visits are harmful for the child (Hess & Proch, 1988).
- Learn ways to manage the disruption of the household routine caused by the child's reactions to visits (Brown & Calder, 1999; Beyer, 1999).

By expanding what they know, foster parents will significantly increase their ability to support children and their families before, during, and after visits.

PROMOTING FOSTER PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Treating foster parents as a formal part of the team serving the child is another way to maximize the contributions they make to parent-child visits. To do this, make sure they are at the table when the birth family, older children, and other providers are defining the child's needs or setting up the visitation schedule.

Keeping the family's schedule in mind when planning visit times and locations is a professional courtesy that makes a big difference to foster families and foster children. For example, "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" (Hess & Proch, 1988). Likewise, "visit beginnings and cont. page 7

endings should not be scheduled at times that will be highly disruptive for the foster family, such as the family's regular dinner hour" (Hess & Proch, 1988).

It is also important to avoid placing too many children from different families or too many special needs children in one home. When this is done, visitation can quickly become an unmanageable burden for foster families, as they struggle to balance transportation, the needs of the visiting child, and the needs of all the children in the home.

Foster parents will also be more committed and involved in parent-child visits if social workers share information with them in an open, timely way. This means keeping them abreast of any changes in visit times or the status of the child's case, and realistically describing the kinds of behaviors they may see on the part of birth parents and children before, during, and after a visit.

Finally, be clear with foster parents about your desire to support them. Discuss with them how they will handle any visit-related problems and make sure they know you are open and available to discuss any issues or concerns they may have. Encourage and appreciate their efforts to support visitation and to work with birth parents.

ROLE OF OTHER FOSTER PARENTS

Other foster parents can really help foster caregivers understand and support visitation. Current research shows that support for foster caregivers is best provided by more experienced foster parents. Based on this, a social worker's best strategy may be to connect foster parents to one another, empower them to help each other, and then to step back but remain available (Denby, et al., 1998).

If you choose this approach, your first step should be to contact your local foster parent association. If your county does not have an active association, contact the North Carolina Foster Parent Association (e-mail: NCFPA@mindspring.com) to discuss how they can help foster parents in your area start a local association.

Foster parents can also support one another through mentoring. In this approach, experienced foster caregivers develop supportive relationships with newer ones. Mentoring can also be combined with support groups for caregivers facilitated by experienced foster caregivers or social workers. These groups can be places to learn, share frustrations or concerns, and model appropriate ways to interact with the children and biological parents (Seaberg & Harrigan, 1999).

WAYS TO SUPPORT FOSTER PARENTS AROUND VISITATION

- Make the importance of foster parents' role in visits clear by keeping them abreast of any changes and having an ongoing discussion about visiting
- Facilitate pre-placement visits between the foster child and family whenever possible
- Tell foster families what kinds of behaviors they can realistically expect to see on the part of birth parents and children before, during, and after a visit
- Involve foster parents in meetings with the biological family and providers
- Ensure foster families receive ongoing education, particularly about the reasons for and effects of visitation
- Facilitate peer support by connecting foster families to each other, particularly through local and state foster parent associations
- Discuss with foster families how they will handle any visit-related problems, and make sure they know you are open and available to discuss any issues or concerns they have
- Avoid overcomplicating visitation for foster families by placing too many children from different families or too many special needs children in one home
- Involve foster families in the planning of the visit schedule; always keep the family's schedule and needs in mind when planning visit times and locations
- Encourage and appreciate foster parents for their efforts to support visitation and to work with birth parents

CONCLUSION

To fully contribute to the process of visitation, foster parents need ongoing education, involvement in the professional team serving the child and family, and the support of their social worker. When they have these things they become involved participants who help make parent-child visits as rewarding and positive as possible for social workers, birth families, and children. ◆

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MAKING THE MOST OF VISITATION

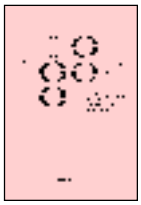
from page 3

- How parent and child separated
- What happened after the visit (parent's or child's reactions)

CONCLUSION

When properly planned, facilitated, and documented, frequent visits between foster children and their parents can be positive experiences that result in equally positive outcomes. ◆

WANT TO KNOW MORE?



- Consult any of the works cited in this issue. If you must be selective, look for something by Peg McCartt Hess, such as Hess and Proch's handbook, *Family Visiting in Out-of-Home Care* (1988, CWLA Press).
- With the N.C. Division of Social Services, the Jordan Institute for Families is developing a two-day course on visitation. For course times and registration information, see the Division's spring 2001 training calendar.

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