

Visitation: Selected Key Points

Benefits of Parent-Child Visits

Regular visits:

- Support the parent-child relationship
- Ease the pain of separation for both parents and children
- Reassure children that their parents are alright
- Help children to understand they are not at fault for their placement
- Reduce the time in out-of-home care and
- Support a child's adjustment in placement.

This may be counter-intuitive to many of us who have seen children anxious before visits and upset afterwards. However, with regular visits, as the children understand that they will continue to see their parents, that their parents are alright, and they receive reassurance of their parents' love and acceptance, this helps children's overall positive adjustment and behavior problems, in general, reduce.

Regular visits also:

- Are associated with safe reunifications
- Provide opportunities for parent(s) to learn and try out their new skills
- Enhance parent motivation to change by providing reassurance that they are important to their child
- Provide opportunities for parent(s) to see how their child is doing, and share information with their caregivers.
- Parent(s) can stay active and current with their child's development, educational and medical needs, as well as church and community activities
- Assists in the assessment of the parents' progress. This helps in determining the permanency plan for the child.

Visitation Requirements at a Glance

To see the complete requirements, go to [Chapter 4254 of the Practice and Procedures Guide](#).

- Parent/child visits are the right of the family when visits are in the best interest of the child (RCW 13.34.136).
- Efforts must be made to hold a visit within 72 hours of placement and not later than 5 days after placement unless there are documented safety threats.
- Written visit plans must be developed within three (3) calendar days of placement.
- The court must approve all changes to a visit plan if the child is dependent.

Learning about Visits

Who Can Supervise or Monitor Visits?

- Children tend to be more comfortable with those they know and trust. Relatives, caregivers and family friends can supervise or monitor visits as long as they understand their role and are aware of the rules of what can and cannot occur during visits.
- Reports from the visits should occur in writing (required by contract or by agreement with non-contracted visit supervisors) or through a verbal report if the non-contracted supervisor is not comfortable completing a written report. If a contracted provider supervises visits, the provider should deliver a report to the caregiver upon return of the child from the visit.
- Social workers should sit in on visits to make their own assessments of progress.

Where Should Visits Take Place?

Family-friendly locations where children can be safe are the best locations for visits. These environments support activities with the parents.

Some examples include:

- The family's home
- A park
- The home of a family friend or a relative
- Child care center
- Visitation center that has family activities

Visitation: Selected Key Points

Visits in a DCFS office may be necessary if there is a concern that additional security or support may be needed to protect the child or the visit supervisor. The top priority when selecting visit locations is always safety.

If there are no concerns about safety, visits in the foster home or relative home should be considered. This supports the parent in feeling more comfortable in their child's living situation and supports the child in seeing their caregivers and parents working together.

Guidelines for Parents

The social worker can provide guidance for parents about what should and should not happen at visits. While it is necessary to make it clear to parents what they should not do during visits, it is also important to be clear about how parents can make visits more successful.

Emphasize to parents:

- The need to come on time and regularly. Seeing the parents is important for every child. This is a time the parents can assure the children that they are okay, love them, and want them to be happy.
- During the visits, the parents should give the child their full attention.
- Parents can bring things to do during the visit: healthy snacks, books, activities and special toys or games are some ideas. Parents can be helped to know what activities are appropriate developmentally for children. For example, infants should be held with simple games or toys such as "peek-a-boo" or games of imitation. Older children will want to play games, color, or read books together. With school-age children, they will want to talk about their activities and the things they do at school. Friends become an important part of children's lives as they grow older.
- They should emphasize the positive with the children, using encouraging statements such as, "You did a good job," "Wow, you are learning new things," and "I am proud of you."
- While it may be hard, parents need to be open to any feelings the child may share. This means not judging those feelings or telling them they are not correct. However, they can be reassuring and caring to the child.
- Help teach the children and include them. For example, after the visit, help the child clean up the room or area.
- Children sometimes feel torn between their caregivers and their parents. Parents can prevent or assist their child with this conflict if they let the child know that they want them to be happy where they are currently living.

To make visits positive, it is also important to never yell at or blame the child, argue with the visit supervisor or social worker in front of the child, or make any promises to the child about issues that are out of the parents' control (such as when the child will return home). As mentioned above, it is

Visitation: Selected Key Points

important that the parents not criticize the child's caregiver or encourage the child to criticize the caregiver. If the parent has concerns about the treatment of the child in the caregiver's home, these should be raised separately with the social worker.

There may also be rules that are appropriate for individual situations. For example, if a parent is chronically late or periodically misses visits, a rule requiring that they call to confirm that they will be coming would be in order or having them arrive early to avoid transporting the child if the parent doesn't come to the visit.

Visit Plans

Creating a Visit Plan

- As with all case planning, creating a visit plan as a team will help ensure it will be positive for everyone involved. FTDMs and other shared planning meetings are great opportunities for developing, reviewing and modifying visit plans.
- Discuss with the parent how frequently and when they can see their children given their schedules for work, treatment, and other obligations. Emphasize to parents the importance of regular visits and how hard it is for children when parents do not show up for visits.
- Ask the parent who can help provide transportation and supervision or monitoring of visits. Remember, don't rely on contracted providers because they are unknown to the child, scarce, and expensive.
- Discuss with the parent a safety plan for visits that includes location and how they will get assistance if needed.
- Caregivers (and the child if appropriate) should provide input about when visits will be most convenient. Consideration should be given to the child's regular schedule (for example, when they nap, school and extracurricular activities as well as when services may occur).
- Relatives and other family supports should be asked to provide their input and asked to volunteer their time to help facilitate visits.
- When appropriate, parents should be encouraged to participate in medical and counseling appointments with the child as well as other activities. This provides opportunities for more frequent contact and parenting activities.

Reviewing and Updating a Visit Plan

- Discuss the plan monthly with caregivers, the child, parents and supervisor
- Review at every shared planning meeting and FTDM
- Explore alternatives for transportation and supervision/monitoring among friends and family
- Discuss when visits can be improved or when things are not going well
- Provide feedback to the parent about observations
- Celebrate positive parenting skills and improvements noted

Reporting to the Court

Both caregivers and social workers report on the outcomes of visits.

Social workers report:

- Compliance with the visit plan
- Observations concerning parent-child interactions
- The progress parents are making in their parenting abilities
- Any behavior of the parent that has a detrimental consequence to the visits

Caregivers report:

- The behavior and emotional state of the child before and after visits
- Discussions with the child about the visits
- [Caregiver Report to Court](#) (DSHS 15-313)

Role of the Social Worker

Planning and Communication

- Ask relatives, family friends, caregivers, and other support persons to provide transportation, supervision or monitoring, and family-like locations for visits.
- Develop visit plans jointly with parents, caregivers and children (if appropriate)
- Discuss visit plans at every FTDM and shared planning meeting
- Team to improve visits
- Consider other natural opportunities for contact such as school events, child's sporting or other extracurricular events if appropriate

Visitation: Selected Key Points

- Report to the court and request modifications of orders to reflect progress toward reunification or to protect the child.

Assessing Progress

The issues that created safety threats for children in their parents' homes are normally related to the individual issues of the parents, such as substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence. These issues affected the family issues such as the home environment and parenting. While we work to assess progress on these individual issues, we also use visits to help us determine how parents' progress is reflected in their parenting of their children.

- Are parents able to attend to the children during the entire visit?
- Do parents show an interest in their children's daily lives and accomplishments?
- Do they have appropriate expectations for their children?
- Are parents able to interact with their children at the children's developmental level?
- Are they able to redirect children's behavior, or do they rely on punishment to stop inappropriate behaviors? Do they ignore inappropriate behaviors?

It is not unusual for parents to show a lack of skills or empathy with their children when visits first start. For example, parents are often anxious about or feel in competition with caregivers and may encourage the children to talk negatively about their caregivers. Parents also may continue to display punitive and emotionally degrading behavior toward their children.

If parents cannot interrupt their prior behavior patterns with their children or if they continue in other negative interactions, it may be that parents do not know behaviors that can substitute. The social worker should talk with the parent about these behaviors, explain why they should change, and assess the parent's intention when these negative interactions occurred. This is when it may be appropriate to introduce some assistance in the visit with an intervention that is evidence-based (if possible) and provides coaching in parenting skills.

Role of the Caregiver and Helping the Parents

Caregivers:

- Ensure children are ready and available for visits
- Schedule time before visits with children, if developmentally appropriate, to help them plan what they want to do during visits and provide this information to the parent
- Meet with parents to discuss how children are doing and to get suggestions that might help children's adjustment. This can include suggestions from the parent about cultural and family activities that can be repeated in the caregiver home or during visits
- Consider having the visit in the caregiver home (this should be discussed with the social worker before being proposed)
- Consider other things you can do to help the visit be more positive:
 - Arrange for pictures to be taken during the visit so that these can be shared with both the parent and child
 - Send copies of drawings, homework, and certificates so that the child can share these with the parent
 - If you do not participate in the visits, create a notebook that allows the caregiver and the parent to exchange notes in writing at the visits
- Set aside time to help the child adjust to returning home after visits. Emotions are likely to be stirring for children as they have to leave their parent yet again. Give the children a chance to talk about this or simply spend some quality time with the child so he or she feels reassured and cared for. Don't force the issue with the child, but help the child decompress.
- Report any concerns about the child to the social worker including changes in behavior or emotions before or after visits, reports from the child about events during visits that might be concerning or positive, and any communication with the child about how they feel about the visits. If you have any concerns that the child may have been abused or neglected during a visit, as a mandated reporter you must report this to Children's Administration Intake. The link for the Child Specific Caregiver Notification form is provided here.

Helping the Parents

Visits are a time when parents can demonstrate to children that they are dealing with their individual issues (such as reducing drug use or improved mental health) while at the same time improving their parenting. Parents often feel that they are under a microscope during supervised visits, and we can all relate to how they must feel. Empathizing with parents, while helping them make visits positive, can

Visitation: Selected Key Points

help them reassure their children and understand how important they are to their children. Both caregivers and social workers can help parents make visits positive.

- Help parents understand what activities are appropriate for their children. For infants, this will include lots of physical touch, responding to physical needs, and playing imitation games and peek-a-boo. Older children develop their own favorite activities. Help parents understand what those are and provide the resources for parents to participate in those activities with their children. For example, send along children's favorite board game, a book the children are being read, or cards to play a card game.
- Help parents attend visits by making sure that visit locations are accessible to the parent and parents are able to call ahead if there is an issue. At the same time, help parents understand the need for their children's comfort at visits and that long travel for a child will contribute to the child being fussy, sleepy, and/or cranky during visits.
- If children ask questions about when they can come home or other questions about the case plan, provide parents answers that are both honest and appropriate.
- Provide honest feedback to parents, while at the same time providing ways that they can improve their interactions with their children.
- Sometimes parents feel that if their children love their caregivers, the children will stop loving their parents. They also may feel that caregivers can provide more materially to the child and are afraid the child will not want to return home. These are natural feelings, and parents often need help to understand that children have room in their hearts for both the parents and the caregivers. Parents supporting their children's happiness in the caregivers' homes is an expression of love for the children and can be reassuring to children that the parents are not angry at or rejecting them.