Family Time/Visitation: The Road to Safe Reunification

Research shows there is a strong connection between family time and safe reunification. We know that quality family time is a key indicator of earlier, and safer, reunifications. This Fact Sheet highlights practices that can improve the experience for the child and family and improve outcomes for them.

First, a note on language. In most parts of the country, child welfare practitioners use the term "visitation" when they are talking about time a child spends with her parents/siblings/extended family. Because that time is essential for a healthy family and because it is what all families do in everyday life, throughout this Fact Sheet we will use the term family time. This may be a switch you'd consider in your jurisdiction to consider communicating the "normalcy" of this experience.

Preparation Matters

Family time, especially soon after a child's removal, can be an extremely stressful experience for both the parents and child. Children may be scared, unclear about whether they can hug their parents in front of people, unsure why they were removed and afraid to ask, and generally feel anxious about sharing their feelings of hurt and sadness. Parents may worry about whether the child is angry at them, may be afraid to come to the agency's office, may be uncertain about how to act in front of the case worker, and may be feeling ashamed and embarrassed. In addition to considering the logistics of the actual family time gathering, the professionals in the case should consider all of these emotions in supporting the family.

The logistics cannot be overlooked; they can be a key to a successful meeting. Family time should be a focus of the family's case plan. The first time a family gets together after a child was removed should occur as soon as possible, **ideally within 48 hours**, and if need be, the judge should order this. Family time should be planned when it does not interfere with a parents' work or child's school schedule. It should occur in a place that is convenient for everyone, and preferably somewhere outside of the child welfare agency's office (like a park, mall, or visitation center).

The case worker should prepare the parent for what to expect during the time with the child. Parents often want to know if they can bring food or a gift. If they will be supervised and by whom and the kinds of things they should say to their child if the child asks questions about when the family will be reunited. Helping parents prepare, logistically and emotionally, can go a long way towards successful family time.

Consider How Much Supervision is Necessary

In most jurisdictions, family time is always supervised, at least at the beginning of the case. Some practitioners have started to ask WHY? Why must the family time be supervised when the child came into care because, for example, of a housing issue or another reason having nothing to do with safety. In contrast, Georgia recently enacted legislation making unsupervised family time the default and it only becomes supervised by court order if the court finds unsupervised visitation is not in the child's best interest. O.C.G.A. 15-11-112.

It is difficult for a family to maintain their connections when someone is sitting nearby, watching every move and taking notes about every interaction. The level of supervision a family requires should be determined on a case by case basis. The caseworker should consider the reasons the child came into care, the child's age, and other family needs. Attorneys for the children and the parents should advocate

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with the agency, and with the court if needed, to have the family time follow the least restrictive setting concept – there should be as little supervision as possible with safety of the child being the primary consideration.

Family Time Should Mimic Family Life

In addition to a preference for unsupervised visits, caseworkers and courts should prioritize family time that actually mimics family life. Because the quality of family time is such a strong indicator of successful reunification, family time itself should resemble real life as much as possible. Concretely this means the visit should take place in locations that the family enjoys being – a park, a relative's home, the family's church or favorite restaurant. The family should be together as often as possible. If a family only sees each other for 1 hour once a week, for example, that means they would only be together for about two days a year. This is certainly not enough. When children are very young, they should see their parents several times a week, and the length of visit could be on the shorter side. When children are older, they may only see their parents once or twice a week, but they might visit for a few hours (or longer) at a time.

In addition to scheduled family time, parents should be encouraged to participate in the child's normal activities. The parent should be told about all doctor and school appointments as well as extracurricular activities that they could go and enjoy. Even if the parents and child do not get to interact at these events, it means a lot to both when a parent can see the child play a sport, act in a play, participate in a school concert, or meet the child's friends.

Some jurisdictions such as New York City, have been making use of "visit hosts" as a way to have family time occur often and in settings that are familiar and comfortable for the family. A visit host is someone who the agency and family agree could oversee a visit safely. Examples include a pastor who allows the family to be together after a Sunday service while he is doing work in another room, a relative who hosts Sunday dinner, and a bowling alley manager who allows a father and son to bowl together each week. For more information and to see New York's Visit Host Policy see below in Resource Section.

In other places, communities have creating visiting centers. Often, these are in houses where staff can be on site, but out of sight, and families can do "family activities." There are often kitchens so the family can make a meal, living areas to relax, play games, read books or work on homework together and bath tubs so parents can bathe their young children. This type of setting provides the answer to concerns about supervision that some might have while providing a comfortable setting for the family.

Barriers to Quality Family Time

Of course there are practical issues that arise when stakeholders are considering improving the way they provide family time. Transportation to and from the gathering, staff time to organize and/or supervise, money to develop a family time center, and probably the most difficult, the will to change "the way we do things." While all of these are real concerns, many jurisdictions have joined together to figure out creative solutions to over-coming these issues. In some places, like a county in North Carolina, all it took was a judge who kept ordering family time for babies to happen three times a week. At first the system was stressed by this, but then they came together and figured out how to make it happen. Understanding the importance of family time to the child's well-being, as the judge did, provided strong motivation for family time that mimics family life in that county.

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Resources:

Guggenheim, Martin and Vivek S. Sankaran, ed. *Representing Parents in Child Welfare Cases: Advice and Guidance for Family Defenders*. American Bar Association, 2015. *Specifically see:* Appendix A to Chapter 6, A Bridge Back Home: Visit Hosts New York City Administration for Children's Services Division of Family Support Services Office of Family Visiting (2007) and Appendix B to Chapter 6, New York City Administration for Children's Services Best practice Guidelines for Family Visiting Arrangements for Children in Foster Care.

Enhanced Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases. NCJFCJ, 2016, pp. 85-88.

Jordan Institute for Families, UNC-CH School of Social Work. *Visiting with Your Child.* February 2015.

Jordan Institute for Families, UNC-CH School of Social Work. *Visitation Matters: Minimizing the Trauma.* 2014.

Center for Family Representation. *A Cornerstone Approach to Moving Child Protective Cases: Small Adjustments for Judges and Practitioners to Consider.*

National Family Preservation Network. *Best Practice for Father-Child Visits in the Child welfare System.* February 2012. http://nfpn.org/father-involvement/father-child-visits

Partners For Our Children. *From Evidence to Practice: Family Visitation – Family Visitation in Child Welfare: helping Children Cope with Separation while in Foster Care.* April 2011.

Pennsylvania Parent Visitation Guide,
http://www.ocfcpacourts.us/assets/upload/Parent%20Visitation%20Handbook(2).pdf

Videos:

PA: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOrdjqHPBsY&feature=youtu.be – visitation starts at 28:37
NJ: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cm9-UJJJ2Uc

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