



Iowa Children's Justice

Iowa Children's Justice Update

To inform the courts and other interested members of our state community, Iowa Children's Justice will send out periodic information about issues and activities related to Juvenile Court.

Family Interaction February 2009

February Topic Family Interaction

Starting in March, 2009, DHS will begin to 'roll out' an initiative to support family interaction. This initiative recognizes that regular, reliable and goal oriented visits between children in foster care and their parents and family members are fundamental to achieving permanency. The philosophy that underpins this initiative is supported by the federal Fostering Connections Act and the CFSR. Over the next six months, both DHS and the Children's Justice will be emphasizing the concepts and principles supporting meaningful family interaction through a series of presentations and workshops.

Why is this important?

Children and their parents have a *right* to spend time together. Iowa code requires that a child in foster care have reasonable visitation or supervised visits [*a.k.a. interactions*] with his/her parents unless substantial evidence exists that visits would cause imminent risk to the child. CFSR expectations go one step further by specifying ongoing contact with siblings and significant family members.

Research tells us that 'frequent and developmentally appropriate family interaction benefits the child emotionally and is the strongest indicator of family reunification and permanency.' Regular family interactions for children in care are important and necessary to

- Maintain the parent-child relationship and other family attachments,
- Reduce the stress of abandonment for the child and
- Minimize the harmful effects of family separation.

Best practice guidelines

Basic guidelines for family interaction include:

- The first family interaction should occur within 1 – 5 working days following out of home placement, unless otherwise restricted by the court.
 - DHS should develop a written **family interaction plan** within 10 calendar days after placement or by the time of the removal hearing – whichever comes first.
 - Interactions should be limited or denied **only** when necessary to protect a child's health, safety, or welfare (e.g. domestic violence, sexual abuse, parental institutionalization)
 - Interactions should occur in the least restrictive and most homelike setting possible
 - Interactions should involve the parent(s) in routine activities of parenting and provide opportunities to enhance parenting skills and learn new behaviors
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Family interaction plan

Best practice in child welfare indicates that family interaction should be an integral part of the family's case plan. Interactions should be guided by a **family interaction plan** that encourages a progressive increase in the parent(s) responsibility, moves a family as quickly and safely as possible from supervised to unsupervised visits and provides a family with the opportunity to learn, practice, and demonstrate new, healthy behavior patterns. A **family interaction plan** should be developed collaboratively as part of a Family Team Meetings.

A written **family interaction plan** should

- Be tailored to meet the safety and developmental needs of the family and child
- Identify why the child was removed and what will be done to monitor and mitigate any safety concerns
- Assure that family interaction begins as soon as possible after a child is removed
- Clearly assign responsibilities for which the parent, DHS and providers will be held accountable
- Contain time frames to reevaluate the plan so that families can move to reunification as quickly and safely as possible.

A family interaction plan must *never* be used as a threat or form of discipline for a child or to control or punish a parent.

Goals of family interaction

Family interaction is central to maintaining important relationships and achieving timely permanency. The goals of family interaction include:

- Reducing a child's sense of abandonment and loss upon removal
- Resolving threats of harm requiring that family interaction be monitored
- Providing the opportunity for families to
 - learn, practice and demonstrate new behaviors and patterns of interaction
 - maintain meaningful contact consistent with the developmental need of the child to further progress toward achieving permanency for the child
 - maintain relationships with siblings, parents and other individuals
- Providing the opportunity for DHS and the courts to
 - assess the caregiver/child relationship
 - assess caregiver needs for
 - Parent training
 - Community resources & referral
 - Concrete supports

What does this mean for judges?

Judges may soon begin to see **family interaction plans** presented to the court. This written plan should assure that safety concerns are monitored; children, siblings and family members have regular, ongoing contact in settings that are as 'normal' as possible; a timeframe is in place to reevaluate the plan and assure that goals are set, progress made and barriers to family reunification are addressed. Your leadership can help.

- Attorneys and others may not be familiar with the new plans. Encourage them to learn more about how this initiative is different than the more traditional visitation plans.
- Inquire from the bench if the plan does not seem to meet the needs of the child.
- Inquire to assure the parent understands the plan and their responsibility during the visit.
- Re-visit the plan regularly to assure movement on the case.
- Visits should not be reduced because of budgetary concerns - creativity is called for.
- Remember: visits are not a reward - they are critical to a child's emotional well-being and a necessary intervention to assure reasonable efforts for reunification.

For more information about family interaction

For more information about the initiative on family interaction contact Lori Mozena at lmozena@achievements-inc.com or Wendy Rickman at wrickma@dhs.state.ia.us

For more information on Iowa Children's Justice

This e-mail may be forwarded to others you think might be interested. If you would like to add someone to our mailing list, please send their e-mail address to jane.kieler@iowacourts.gov.

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