

MANAGING VISITATION RIGHT TIME VIDEO

Key Points

General Information

While children are in foster care, meaningful visits with their parents are both a critical way of maintaining relationships and a means of working toward reunification. For children who are adopted, visitation with their parents might look different, but these are still meaningful because they can help children connect their past with their present. When children want visits with their parents, it does not mean that the children can't or don't love both sets of parents. Family visits can be an opportunity for children and both sets of parents to build relationships and develop strong connections.

Part 1: Preparing for Visits

- Parents who are fostering are often asked to help with family visits. This help might include transporting the child to the visits, planning or overseeing the visits, or even using a visit to include the parent in routine events such as a doctor's appointment or school activities.
- In preparing for a visit, it is important to think about practical aspects such as what to do during a visit, what to take to the visit, or what to have ready for the child to take to the visit. This type of careful planning will help ensure both the parent who is fostering and the child are prepared to have a positive visit. Things to do to help children prepare for visits include,
 - Have the child make something (such as baked goods or a craft) to bring to the visit and give as a gift to their parent.
 - During the week before the visit, have the child write down everything they want to tell the parent, and then bring the child's journal to the visit and share it with the parent. Having the child keep an ongoing journal not only can help prepare a child for a visit but also can help a child explore their feelings after a visit.
 - Think about games, toys, or other things that the child and parent can play with together during the visit. The parent who is fostering or adopting will need to consider what activities will be appropriate for the visiting place, such as a bubble wand for outdoor spaces or coloring books for indoor spaces.
 - Keep a folder with the child's artwork and schoolwork, and send the folder with the child to share with their parent during the visit.
 - Take pictures during the week and bring prints to the visit for the child to share with their parent.
- If the visit includes more than one child, be sure to think of what each child can make or take with them to the visit to share with their parent.

Part 2: Preparing Children for Visits

- Helping children prepare for visits well in advance can do much toward ensuring visits are successful and not overly stressful. Advance planning for visits will look different for each child, depending on the child's age, history, and emotional needs. Thinking about the child and their needs in advance of visits is crucially important for making sure the child understands what the visit entails and ensuring the visit feels like a safe, positive experience.
- Make sure to tell the child when a visit is coming up and where the visit will take place. Speak positively about the experience but don't assume to know what the child is feeling about the visit.
- Preparing for visits also includes talking with the child about their feelings about the visit. Although most children will be excited and will look forward to visits, they might also be feeling anxious, scared, or sad. Before the visit, talk to the child about their expectations, what they are looking forward to, and what they might be anxious or scared about. Acknowledging any fears the child brings up is important and presents an opportunity to help the child cope with their anxiety by offering ways to alleviate their fears.
- At times, it might be helpful for parents who are fostering or adopting to stay with the child during the visit. Some children will feel less anxious knowing they have the extra support of the parent who is fostering or adopting them. However, it is important to let the child's parent have time on their own with the child.
- Visits might affect the children's behavior because children express their feelings through behavior. Helping children become aware of their feelings and become calm before the visit can help improve the quality of the visit. For example, playing breathing games might help some children calm down while others can benefit from running around to burn off nervous energy.

Part 3: Working with the Child's Parents

- The child's parents are central to their life and will always be part of the child's lineage and history, so it is important to try and establish a partnership with the parent. Working with the child's parents can help the child connect and make sense of the pieces of their life.
- Some child's parents might have experienced trauma and abuse in their own life. They might not have supportive families or have anyone in their life to role model good parenting. As such, it can be challenging for these individuals to model positive parenting behaviors. It is important to keep in mind that some parents have
 - lived through multiple traumas;
 - just started their own healing journey to becoming happy, whole, and healthy;
 - have not had role models for nurturing parenting skills;
 - might feel awkward or defensive around the person fostering their child; and/or
 - have not been given a fair shot at success and might have low self-esteem.

- Parents who are fostering or adopting should think about how they can build trust and a supportive partnership with a child's parent. Viewing visits from the lens of the child's parents can be helpful because this perspective can help to ensure the parents feels comfortable and are able to interact freely with the child.
- Be thoughtful about who and how many people are involved in the visits (often the fewer people, the better). Remember, visits are meant to be a time for parents to visit and connect with their children. Even small gestures can send a positive message about the parents' role in their child's life. For example, parents who are fostering or have adopted can hang back at the visits and let the child and their parent reconnect and decide what comes next.
- Parents who are fostering or adopting can think about how to guide and fill the role of mentor for the child's parents without making parenting a competition. This can be done by positively reinforcing the parent for what they are doing right during the visit and recognizing the positive ways the child is responding to the child's parent. Examples could include pointing out how the child is looking at or laughing with the parent. In addition — if allowed by the visitation plan—parents who are fostering or adopting might want to consider including the parents in more activities with the child so that the parent can be involved with homework, school or club activities, and daily skill building.
- Kinship caregivers might face additional challenges and their own hurt feelings that stem from their family history. However, it is important for the kinship caregiver to set aside these feelings for the sake of the child and make sure family visits are a positive experience. Be positive and respectful in interacting with the parents.

Part 4: Providing Support After a Visit

- Saying goodbye can be the hardest part of a visit. Parents who are fostering or adopting can help the child with ending a visit by thinking of ways to make a smooth transition, including setting a time for that evening for the child to call the parent or setting a time, date, and place for the next visit so the child knows when it will be take place. When the child returns home from a visit, it is important for the parent who is fostering or adopting to set time aside to provide support to the child and help the child work through their feelings from the visit. Although it might feel like the parent who is fostering or adopting is “picking up the pieces” after the visit, it is important to remember these visits are critically important for both the parent and the child.
- Following a visit, parents who are fostering or adopting should be prepared for the child to exhibit some behaviors that might be different from their typical behavior, including withdrawing, not wanting to play or eat, seeming sad, having nightmares or disturbed slept, and showing signs of anger or even rage over not being with their families when they love them so much. When faced with a child displaying such behaviors, it is important for parents who are fostering or adopting to remember how being separated from their families can be unsettling, upsetting, and confusing for a child. Although having to deal with these behaviors could make it seem as if visits are not worth it in the short run because visits upset the child, it could be far worse for the child in the long run if visits do not take place.

- Strategies to ease goodbyes include
 - Making the visit endings consistent, such as doing goodbyes (and greetings) the same way at each visit.
 - Setting up a time for the child to talk to the parent by phone that evening or soon after the visit.
 - Taking pictures of the child with the parent during the visit that can be given to the child after the visit to put in a memory book.
 - Having the child express their feelings about the visit by drawing a picture or writing a letter that they can give their parent at the next visit.
 - Giving the child space and time after the visit to relax and ponder their feelings.

Part 5: Handling Missed Visits

- At times, the child’s parent might miss a visit. Although there is no simple way to ease the child’s disappointment over a missed visit, it can be helpful to be prepared with a few strategies for handling a missed visit:
 - Don’t promise that visits will take. Instead, when talking about visits with the child, use flexible language such as “the plan is,” “the plan might change but we might not know,” or “we might have to get back in the car and leave.”
 - Be prepared with a backup plan of where to go and what to do in the event the visit does not take place.
 - Take cues from the child for what kind of support they need.
 - Validate a child’s big feelings, but do not join the child in saying bad things about their parent. Parents who are fostering or adopting might say something like, “I am so sorry you did not get to see your parent this week” and “I know they really look forward to seeing you and they will want to see you as soon as possible.”
 - Be mindful to reassure the child that a missed visit does not mean they are unimportant to their parents or that their parents just blew off the visit.
- A parent might have a legitimate reason for missing a visit, so it’s important to give them the benefit of the doubt. A parent might miss a visit at the last minute because of forces beyond their control such as not being able to get a pass from a treatment center or parole officer, or having problems with transportation (such as having to take multiple buses or a bus breaking down on the way to the visit). Reframing such events can be a powerful way of showing the child evidence of how much their parent cares (“It can’t be easy to get to a visit when your father has to take four different buses and spend 90 minutes traveling to see you.”) even if the parent is not always successful at overcoming the barriers to visits.
- It is important to remember that keeping the child connected with their parent through visits can improve the child’s well-being and behavior in the long term. Visits also give parents hope as they work toward reunification; seeing their children can give parents the motivation they need to keep up with the hard work of their reunification plans.