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**NTDC Right Time Training  
PREPARING FOR AND MANAGING VISITATION  
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Question 1: Why are visits with parents so critical for children?**

Separation from their parents can be very damaging to children and can impact them for a long time. Research shows that visits between parents and children are linked to the children's well-being. Children who have frequent visits with their parents may be less likely:

- to have emotional outbursts, tension and conflict
- to be referred for psychiatric services
- to engage in negative or risky behaviors such as vandalism, stealing and running away.<sup>1</sup>

Visits with their parents help children to know that their parents are okay. This knowledge can reduce the trauma that a child feels from being separated. Regular visits help the bond between the parent and the child to stay strong. A strong parent-child bond not only is the foundation of a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development but also an aid in development of the child's self-identity. "Family time is essential for healthy child development, especially for children in foster care, as it helps to maintain parent-child attachment, reduce a child's sense of abandonment, and preserve a sense of belonging as part of a family and community. Family time offers reassurance for children and their parents, opportunities to strengthen cultural and kinship connections, and motivation for parents to enroll in treatment or meet other permanency plan requirements."<sup>2</sup> A child's adjustment to foster care can help the placement to be more stable, which is beneficial for the child and for the parent fostering the child.

Visits also can provide a chance for the parent to learn and to practice positive parenting skills. Research has shown that children who have frequent visits with their parents spend less time in foster care than children who rarely or never see them. Without visits to maintain their family connections, the parent-child relationship between the parent and the child in foster care can weaken, break down or be cut off. Loss of the parent-child bond will make it harder for the child to return home.

When a child cannot return home, a regular schedule of visits with the child's parent can help to keep family relationships strong. Even if the parent is unable to provide adequate care for the child, ongoing contact can help the parent to play a positive role in the child's life. This contact also lets the child know that the parent still loves and cares for the child. Research

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<sup>1</sup> White, M., Albers, E., & Bitonti, C. (1996). Factors in length of foster care: worker activities and parent-child visitation. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 23(2), 75–83.

<sup>2</sup> Casey Family Programs. (2020). How can frequent, quality family time promote relationships and permanency? *Strong Families Strategy Brief*. Retrieved May 13, 2021, <https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/20.07-QFF-SF-Family-Time.pdf>

shows that knowing about family history can lower a child's anxiety, reduce behavioral problems and increase self-esteem.<sup>3</sup> Staying in contact with parents, siblings and other family members also gives the child better access to information such as family medical and health records.

### **Question 2: What is a visitation plan?**

The child's caseworker needs to develop a visitation plan soon after the child enters the child welfare system. (In some states or tribes this plan needs to be developed in conjunction with or to be approved by a court.) The visitation plan should be based on the child's permanency plan. It should take into consideration the child's developmental and attachment needs. A strong, high-quality plan will help the parent to practice positive parenting skills, to demonstrate the ability to care for the child and to keep the child safe. Although the parent who is fostering does not help to develop the plan, that person has a critically important role in supporting the plan and helping to ensure that the child's visits with the parent are successful. The child's input may also be sought, especially for older children or teens.

Visitation plans are meant to be specific to each family. They are an important part of the case plan and need to be reviewed regularly by the child welfare agency and the court. They also are meant to be changed over time as the parent moves closer toward a permanency goal. The plan should include details about the type of visits allowed (supervised or unsupervised), the frequency and the location of each visit. The frequency of visits likely will increase as the child moves closer to going home.

The visitation plan needs to state clearly if visits should be supervised, the reason why the supervision is needed and who is authorized to supervise the visits. Among the reasons for supervised visits are the need to protect the child from harm and to ensure that the visits are carried out in a way that is supportive for the child. As the parent shows an increasing ability to care for and to keep the child safe, the plan normally provides for the level of supervision to decrease accordingly.

The visitation plan needs to be reviewed often to help determine if changes should be made in supervision, frequency, or location. This review needs to include the child's ideas about the visits as well as input from the parent, the person fostering the child and others involved with the family.

### **Question 3: How can parents who are fostering prepare a child for visits with the child's family?**

Start by making sure that the child knows when each visit will occur, its location, who will be present during the visit and how long it will last. Ask the child what the child would like to do

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<sup>3</sup> Duke, Marshal P., et al. (2008). Knowledge of Family History as a Clinically Useful Index of Psychological Well-Being and Prognosis: A Brief Report, 45 *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 268.

during the visit; then share those ideas with the caseworker and the parent (if the child's ideas for activities for the visit are age appropriate). If the child you are fostering is a teen, seeking suggestions for activities and games that they would enjoy could still be important and may help to encourage family interaction rather than relying on social media to fill in the time.

Help the child to make a "Happy Pack" to bring along to the visit. A Happy Pack is a backpack filled with special things that symbolize what has happened since the last visit. Help the child to fill a Happy Pack by collecting schoolwork, pictures of the child, drawings made by the child and notes written about the child's daily life. Helping the child to make and to fill the Happy Pack can help to get the visit off to a good start because it guarantees that the child always has something to show the parent. For teens, a folder can be used to transport important things to share with family members. While suggestions can be helpful, it's important to remember that teens will want to make decisions about what to take and share. For children, a special routine before a visit can be helpful. For example, this could involve picking out special clothes to wear for the visit, fixing the child's hair or coloring a picture to give to the parent. Let the child take a favorite toy or stuffed animal for comfort. Whenever possible, parents who are fostering need to take the child to the visit to see the child's family.

After the visit, talk with the child about what the child is feeling. If the child is sad or angry about having to say, "Goodbye," let the child know that this feeling is normal. Encourage the child to look forward to the next visit. Work with the child welfare agency to determine if and how the child can keep in touch with the child's parent between visits. Answer the child's questions as honestly as you can and in a way that the child can understand. Remember always to stay in close contact with the child welfare agency about visitations.

#### **Question 4: What is a visitation notebook, and how can it be used as a tool to assist with visits?**

A **visitation notebook** is a notebook that is passed back and forth between the child's parent and the parent who is fostering the child. In the notebook, the parent who is fostering can write notes about what the child has done since the last visit. The visitation notebook can be used to update the parent about the child's school, activities and medical appointments. This information helps the child's parent to know what is happening that is important in the child's life and to stay connected with the child. In return, the parent can add notes to the visitation notebook for the parent who is fostering, such as reminders about upcoming birthdays or other special events that the parent wants to bring to the child's attention. A visitation notebook can help the child's parent feel involved and included in the child's life. It also can help the parent who is fostering keep the child connected with the child's family.

An example of a visitation notebook is included in the resource section for this theme. This example can be used to "open the door" for communication between the child's parent and the parent who is fostering. For teens, the visitation notebook can still be useful, but it will be important to include the teen in deciding what should be shared.

## **Question 5: How can visits with a parent affect the child? How can visits affect the child's parent?**

A child can feel happy and excited about visits with a parent. At other times, the child can become upset before, during or after a visit with a parent. When the child sees a parent, the child might have a return of feelings of loss and separation. Because the child is re-experiencing this loss and separation, the child might do any of the following:

- return to babyish behavior,
- whine more,
- have nightmares,
- wet the bed,
- become aggressive,
- be unable to listen,
- complain of physical pain,
- become moody,
- be disrespectful or defiant, or
- break the rules more often.

You will need to be patient with a child who is experiencing these difficult feelings and recognize that the child's challenging behaviors are signs of grieving, not misbehavior, and this also applies to teens.

Both the child and the parent can be worried or scared about seeing each other. The parent might feel guilty that the child cannot come home. The child might feel confused about being unable to go home with the parent or might feel personally at fault for doing something that has resulted in not being allowed to go home to the child's family. For teens, this worry can sometimes appear as looking angry or sullen.

Children might think that if they love their parents, then they must reject the parents who are fostering or adopting them. A child can feel the need to defend parents when someone talks about them in a negative way. This is why it is so important for parents who are fostering or adopting to support the child's relationship with the child's parents as much as possible. If the child has negative feelings and reactions to visits with parents, then discuss this with the child's caseworker, not with the child or the parents.

Even though parents usually enjoy visiting their children, these visits can make parents feel worse about their family being separated. Leaving their child after every visit can be very painful. Parents might feel strange, uncomfortable and on guard around parents who are fostering. They can feel in competition with the family that is fostering.<sup>4</sup> Parents might try to deal with these feelings by making promises that they can't keep. They also might say bad things to the child about the parents who are fostering. At other times, parents might try to

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<sup>4</sup> Beyer, M. (n.d.). *Supporting families to meet their children's needs*. Strengths/Needs-Based Support for Children, Youth & Families Retrieved May 13, 2021, <https://www.martybeyer.com/content/supporting-families-meet-their-childrens-needs>

make up to their child by bringing a lot of gifts or making a lot of calls to the home where the child is in foster care. To deal with their own feelings of loss and pain, some parents might use alcohol or drugs before a visit. Sometimes they might cancel visits at the last minute or not show up for visits.

**Question 6: What are the most important elements in successful visits between children and their parents?**

Visits are intended to build on a parent's strengths and to give the parent a chance to learn and to practice parenting skills. Therefore, it is important for the visits to happen in a place and a manner that allow the parent and the child to perform an activity together, such as making a craft, cooking, reviewing schoolwork, looking at pictures or playing a board game. A parent who is fostering can help to ensure that the visits go well by having the supplies for an activity available and ready. For example, the parent who is fostering could bring the child's favorite board game to the visit as well as the child's schoolwork done since the last visit. If the parent who is fostering stays for the visit, it is very important to let the child's parent assume the parental role during the visit. Throughout the visit, the child's parent needs to have time to talk with the child, to interact with the child and to be the one who meets the child's needs. For example, if the child becomes upset during the visit, the child's parent needs to be the one who comforts and calms the child. In some cases, the parent who is fostering will need to model or to demonstrate positive ways to interact or to share an activity with the child, then to encourage the parent to take over the parental role during the visit. Remember, some acting out behaviors can be considered a normal reaction to the situation and may reflect the child or teen's feelings of worry, grief, and anger.

The parent who is fostering needs to work with the child welfare agency to make sure that visits with the child's parent are taking place. If a child is feeling anxious or unsure about an upcoming visit with the parent, it can be helpful if the parent who is fostering stays involved in the visit. Such involvement provides the parent who is fostering with opportunities to talk with the child's parent and to build a relationship based on their shared interest in the child's well-being. Visits are meant to be a time for fun and play. They need to happen in a homelike setting where positive contact and interaction between the parent and the child can occur.

**Question 7: Why is it important for a parent who is fostering to participate in visits with the child's parents?**

When a parent who is fostering joins visits with the child's parents, that involvement and participation can benefit the child in many ways. First, supporting visits with parents helps to support the relationship between the child and the parents. This support shows that the parent who is fostering acknowledges and respects that relationship. Second, supporting the child's visits with parents gives the parent who is fostering opportunities to show (also called **to model**) the child's parents appropriate ways to have parent-child interactions. In turn, parents

can use this example to model their own behaviors and interactions for the child. Last, when a parent who is fostering takes part in visits with the child's parents, this reassures the child that it is okay to have connections with the child's parents as well as the parent who is fostering. The times immediately before and after a visit with parents can be especially challenging and stressful for the child. This stress is another reason why it helps for the parent who is fostering to take part in visits with the child's parents. Having an adult present whom the child trusts will help the child through the stressful times before and after the visit. Ultimately, this involvement will help to develop the relationship between the child and the parent who is fostering.

Flexibility in scheduling visits is helpful. When face-to-face visits can't happen, parents who are fostering can talk with the child welfare agency about allowing the child in their care to stay in touch with the child's parents and other family members through phone calls, video chats or text messaging.

Work with the child welfare agency to get pictures of the child's parents, siblings and other persons important to the child. Allow the child to display these pictures in the child's bedroom or around your home. Displaying these pictures in your home will show the child that you support the child's relationship with parents, siblings and other persons who are important in the child's life.

### **Question 8: What are some strategies that can help to engage parents in visits?**

Parents who are fostering can support visits by making sure that the child in their care takes along everything that might be needed during a visit, such as games, snacks and supplies or equipment for activities that the child can do with the parents.<sup>5</sup> One tool to engage parents in visits is the "Happy Pack." (For teens, perhaps a folder). The Happy Pack is a backpack filled with special things that symbolize what has happened since the last visit. Between visits, the child (with the help of a parent who is fostering, depending on the child's age) puts things into the Happy Pack that the child is excited to share with the child's parents. For example, a Happy Pack might include:

- A new favorite book
- A note about something cute or funny that the child said
- New words a young child has learned
- The child's artwork, such as a picture the child drew
- A note from the child's teacher or schoolwork that the child is proud to show
- A picture of the child doing a favorite activity
- School report cards, school or activities newsletters
- A letter that the child has written to the child's parents

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<sup>5</sup>Leader, D. (2017). Tip sheet for supporting family reunification. Child Law Practice, Vol. 36. Retrieved May 13, 2021, [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law/resources/child\\_law\\_practiceonline/child\\_law\\_practice/vol-36/sept-oct-2017/tip-sheet-for-supporting-family-reunification/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/sept-oct-2017/tip-sheet-for-supporting-family-reunification/)

Whenever something comes up that the child might want to share with the parents, encourage the child to put it into the Happy Pack. The Happy Pack gives parents a way to start their visits by letting them know what their child has been doing since the last visit. The Happy Pack can help parents feel more involved in their child's life.<sup>6</sup> For an older child or teen, activities during visits might include sharing photos of the child's participation in events; schoolwork, artwork or other creations; board games; supervised walks, or other outdoor activities.

The resource section for this theme includes a tool called ***Managing Visits: Supports During Visits*** that you can use to prepare for and to support visits with the parents of the child in your care.

You also can bring food to share during a visit or can encourage the child's parents to celebrate school awards, holidays and birthdays during visits. Ask the parents to bring items to the visit to share. You also can bring items from or made by the child that the child can give to the parents. Ask the child's parents to share family stories during visits.

**Question 9: What are the best words to use when talking with a child whose parent has missed or canceled a visit?**

There may be times when a parent misses a visit or cancels at the last minute. Even though this can be frustrating for the parent who is fostering, it is important not to express this frustration to the parent or the child. When visits are missed or canceled, it is extremely important for the parent who is fostering to comfort the child without saying anything negative about the parent. When you tell a child that a visit has been canceled, give assurance that the child did not do anything wrong and was not the reason that the visit was canceled. Remind the child that despite the canceled visit, the parent still loves the child. If you know the reason for the cancellation, tell the child what you know, using simple words and facts. For example, "Your mom called your caseworker and said she could not come today." Be careful not to blame the parent. If the visit was arranged to take place at another relative's home, maybe the child can visit with the other family members instead.

If the parent makes a habit of missing or canceling visits with the child, talk with someone at the child welfare agency about how to ease the child's feelings of disappointment, upset or frustration when the visits don't occur. Remember that the child might show anger, disappointment, or sadness in these situations by acting out, withdrawing and avoiding contact with others, or saying mean or hurtful things to the parent who is fostering. As hard as this can be to tolerate, remember that the child's behaviors are not personal to you but are connected with the child's feelings about the missed or canceled visit.

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<sup>6</sup> NC Division of Social Services. (2010). A tool for enhancing visits: The "happy pack". *Fostering Perspectives*, Vol. 15, No.1. Retrieved May 13, 2021, <https://fosteringperspectives.org/fpv15n1/happypack.htm>

**Question 10: Why should visits with parents never be taken away from the child as a punishment?**

Visits are a basic right of children. Many states or tribes have policies that protect this right. These policies include guidelines for the conditions that must be met in order for a parent's visits to be changed or stopped. It is very important that children in foster care do not feel that they have been abandoned by their parents. So, the visits need to follow the schedule developed by the child welfare agency, a court, or both. Additionally, parents who are fostering should never take away a visit with a parent as punishment for the child. Visits with one or both parents are not an "extra activity" or a "special privilege" but rather a basic right and a core activity central to the child's overall well-being. Taking away visits as a punishment can cause the child's challenging behaviors to escalate and can damage the relationship between the child and the parent who is fostering.

**Question 11: What are some cultural considerations when preparing for and managing visitation?**

Every family is unique. Approach visits as a learner and seek to understand and to respect each family and the family's culture. Consider the following:

- ***Accessibility and location of the visits***

Be thoughtful about the location of the visits; think about whether a certain place will feel comfortable and somewhat familiar to all involved in the visits. Be mindful of whether a cost is involved in traveling to or visiting at the location. Also consider whether persons who look like the family or speak their language will be at the chosen location.
- ***Gifts and food***

Be thoughtful about what you bring or don't bring to a visit as well as what you will or won't accept during the visit. Become aware of the meaning of gifts to the child's family and be mindful of who should be the person to give or to receive them. Food in particular may be important to share because it can help you and the family to establish a trusting relationship with one another. Consider which food would be meaningful to bring and be sure to try anything new to you that is offered.
- ***Communication styles***
  - The ways that people communicate are impacted by their culture. This includes subtleties such as eye contact, voice volume, emotional expression and body language. Any of these may have a different meaning for the child's family than for your family. For example, people of one culture may consider eye contact critical while those of another may view it as disrespectful.
  - If the child's family does not speak the language that you speak, think about how and with whom communication can and should occur. Do not use children as interpreters.



- Be aware that family cultures vary. For example, some families are very noisy while others communicate more quietly. Be respectful of communication styles of the child's family. Avoid making assumptions or interpretations.
  - Who talks with whom and how people greet one another are cultural factors. Asking which member of the child's family should be the point person to your family can help to ensure clear communication.
  - Your caseworker may be able to give you tips about communication and which communication style is typical for the child's family; so, be sure to check with the caseworker about communication-related questions you may have.
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- ***Traditions and holidays***
    - Ask the child's family how they recognize holidays and which dates have key significance to the family or in the family's culture or religion. Be sure to learn which traditions they would like to be honored while the child is with you. If the child's family members will not be present when you and the child are observing these traditions, share stories or photos of the traditional ceremony during the next visit with the family.
    - It would be helpful if the child's parents and the parents who are fostering work together to preplan the visits. They can discuss what would be appropriate to bring or to share during the visits. (For example, some tribes have a belief that photographs should not be taken of newborns or that if a family is in mourning, the family should not be sharing pictures until their mourning period is over.) Stay aware of how holidays can impact the visitation schedule.
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- ***Values and child-rearing beliefs***
    - Be aware that beliefs and values about how children should be raised and disciplined differ across cultures. As long as the child is safe during visits, allow the child's parents to parent without interfering in their practices.
    - If anything comes up during a visit that is worrisome for you, discuss it with the child's caseworker.