

# CHILD PROTECTION BEST PRACTICES BULLETIN

## Innovative Strategies to Achieve Safety, Permanence, and Well-Being

### PARENT-CHILD VISITATION

#### What is *Parent-Child Visitation*?

The primary purpose of visitation is to maintain the parent-child relationship and other family attachments, and to reduce the sense of loss and/or abandonment which children experience at placement. Visitation should never be used as a reward or punishment for parental compliance with the treatment plan.

When carefully and intentionally orchestrated, parent-child visits can be the determining factor in safe reunification. Research suggests that quality parent-child visitation in the context of a reunification plan results in shorter foster care placement.

Under the New Mexico Children's Code, a permanency goal must be selected at the permanency hearing. If the goal selected is reunification, a Transition Home Plan is required. Parent-child visitation, including extended trial home visitation, is an important component of the Transition Home Plan because it increases the likelihood of safe and successful reunification.

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#### What is *current practice*?

Parent-child visitation varies by degree of supervision, location, and frequency in accordance with the strengths and needs of the parents and the best interests of the child.

Currently, visitation is supported by CYFD and happens at graduated levels beginning with supervised visitation, usually at CYFD offices. With time, unsupervised visits are encouraged prior to reunification. In some areas of the state, Access and Visitation Providers are helping to manage the volume and need for supervised visitation.

Current CYFD policy requires that workers support parent-child visitation, including providing transportation when necessary and arranging visits with incarcerated parents when possible. Additionally, CYFD policy supports trial home visitation if it is determined to be in the best interests of the child. CYFD also has policy that encourages and facilitates visitation between children in custody and their siblings, relatives and significant others.

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# Child Protection Best Practices Bulletin

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## What is *best practice*?

**Timely First Visits:** Best practice suggests that, whenever possible, the first visit after a child is removed from the home should occur within 48 hours of the initial removal. Research indicates that delaying visits is harmful to the child emotionally and alienates the parents, reducing the likelihood that they will trust the case worker or participate in services. The more timely the initial visit, the sooner individualized visit support can be developed. Siblings should be included in as many visits as possible.

**Visit coaching:** Agencies nationally have found that coached visits are an exciting innovation and can be more effective than supervised visits. Visit coaching and support is a practice that helps families to make significant changes and life alterations in a short time frame. Visit coaching and support directly address the issues that brought the child into care, building on family strengths and guiding improved parenting. Visit coaching begins with an agreement with the family that identifies the child-specific needs to be addressed and an understanding of how those needs relate to the risks that brought the child into care. Before each visit, families work with the visit coach to address fears, barriers, and parenting issues. During the visit, the coach actively acknowledges the family's strengths in responding to their child(ren) and guides them in improving their skills. After the visit, the family and coach evaluate how the next visit could be improved. Visit coaching can be provided in a variety of ways and settings by case workers, foster parents, case aides, CASAs, parent advocates, therapists, and others so long as they have been trained in visit coaching principles and methods.

**Trial Home Visitation:** Trial home visitation allows for a period of time, not more than six months, in which a child with a plan of reunification resides with a parent or guardian while services are provided to the child and family to address risk factors and to ensure the safety of the child. Trial home visitation should include visit coaching to improve the ability of parents to meet their child(ren)'s needs and to refine their parenting skills. Trial home visitation plans must be written documents with clearly stated timelines and progress indicators (for visitation planning suggestions, see page four).

Research indicates that innovative and focused casework in conjunction with trial home visits can maximize the chances for successful reunification. Trial home visitation best practice suggests providing intensive, family-based services during and beyond trial home visitation; ensuring that there is a resolution to the problem that precipitated the child's removal from home; interactive parent education and training that engages the parent as a team participant; and relationship and trust building between the caseworker and client, that includes providing hope, giving encouragement, listening, and building self-esteem.

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## What are the advantages of *Parent-Child Visitation*?

- o Parent-child visitation helps birth families maintain relationships.
- o Parent-child visitation creates an opportunity for birth parents to learn new skills.
- o Parent-child visitation gives case workers an opportunity to observe and assess families and their progress.
- o Parent-child visitation contributes to shorter periods of foster care.
- o Parent-child visitation increases the probability that children will go home to their families.

# Parent-Child Visitation

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## ***What is my ROLE...***

**As a *JUDGE***, you would require regular reports from caseworkers and visitation providers about visitation and the impact on the child. You would also inquire about parents' behavior and progress during visitations. You would inquire about barriers and seek solutions to parent-child visitation such as transportation, schedules, and appropriate environments for visitation to take place.

**As a *CASEWORKER***, you would assess birth parents' strengths and needs and the child's developmental needs. You would set up a regular, written visitation schedule with birth and foster parents and monitor that visits take place. You would explain visitation activities to birth parents, make sure foster parents know what is expected of them, and explain the temporary nature of visits to the child. You would provide supervision, facilitation, and coaching as appropriate. You would also assess and document any progress observed in the relationship and the communication between the parent and child as well as the impact of each visit on the child.

**As a *CHILDREN'S COURT ATTORNEY***, you would present recommendations from caseworkers about visitation in an informed manner.

**As a *RESPONDENT ATTORNEY***, you would advocate for frequent visitation when appropriate and according to the wishes of your client. You would monitor that visitation is taking place. If there is an incarcerated parent, you would advocate for a visitation plan with that parent.

**As a *YOUTH ATTORNEY***, you would advocate for frequent visitation when appropriate and according to the wishes of your client. You would monitor that visitation is taking place and report to the court the youth's experiences and changing needs for visitation.

**As a *GUARDIAN AD LITEM***, you would advocate for visitation in accordance with the best interests of the child. You would monitor that visitation is taking place and report to the court the child's experiences and changing needs for visitation.

**As a *CASA VOLUNTEER***, you would observe visits and speak with the child privately about the experiences. You would track the visitation schedule, location and safety of the visits, and note any missed visits. You would make recommendations to the Court on the child's best interests in terms of visitation. You could also consider becoming a visit coach.

**As a *CRB MEMBER***, you would inquire specifically about the type of visitation, frequency, and impact. CRB's recommendations and comments on strengths and barriers would then address these issues.

**As the *PARENT/GUARDIAN***, you would visit with your child when and where it's allowed in your visitation plan. You would let your caseworker know if there are barriers to your visits that the caseworker could help resolve. If you have a visit coach, you would meet with your coach before each visit and work with him or her to resolve problems and improve your next visits.

**As the *CHILD or YOUTH***, you would participate in visits with your parents. You would talk to your caseworker about your visitation schedule and how your visits are going. You would also talk to your attorney or GAL about what you want in terms of visiting your family.

**As a *FOSTER PARENT***, you would work with the caseworker and do what you can to help make productive and effective visits occur. You would observe and report to the caseworker what the child said about the visit

## Visitation Planning Suggestions

The Visitation Plan should be developed by the caseworker with the involvement of the parents, other family members, the child(ren) (if appropriate), foster parents, and relevant others, such as a child’s therapist.

Best practice suggests that the visitation plan cover the following content areas:

- ◆ Dates, times and location of visits
- ◆ How arrangements will be made
- ◆ Who will be present
- ◆ Arrangements for monitoring, visit coaching, or supervision, if any
- ◆ Plan for handling of emergency situations
- ◆ Procedures for handling problems with visitation
- ◆ Case goals
- ◆ Identifying information regarding the family members and others relevant to the visiting plan
- ◆ Visit frequency
- ◆ Visit length
- ◆ Visit activities
- ◆ Transportation arrangements
- ◆ Visit conditions (e.g. specific behaviors that must or must not occur)

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