

# Visitation

Practice Notes, Issue #1

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## Welcome to CASCW Practice Notes

The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare is pleased to present this first issue of CASCW Practice Notes, which is designed to assist child welfare practitioners in linking research with their practice. Our theme for the year will focus on areas of concern that relate to placement permanency. Recommendations on how "Practice Notes" might best meet your needs as a child welfare practitioner are welcome. For this issue, we will look at the topic of visitation.

Visitation In our exploration of the literature, we found that there is little controversy in research regarding the value of parental visitation in determining a child's return to the home. There exists an assumption of "reasonable efforts" for parental visitation in most case plans. However, variations occur in how the plan is developed and presented, and whether visitation is encouraged. What follows is a collection of journal article summaries, highlighting concerns and questions on visitation planning and practice. We have also spotlighted a local pilot project.

### **Neuman, C.H. (1997). Visitation guidelines. Concurrent Permanency Planning Casework Guide. Trumbull County Children Services Board.**

#### ***Visitation Guidelines***

- Frequent visitation increases the chance of the child's return home.
- Frequent visitation maintains the parents' and child's attachments to each other.
- Frequency of visits should correlate with the child's age and sense of time (e.g., parental visitation should occur every 2 or 3 days with an infant and once a week for a toddler).
- Frequent visitation keeps the child foremost in the parents' thoughts and concerns. Parents will be more likely to work (and work quickly) toward reunification when visiting frequently with the child.
- Visitation should be part of the written agreements developed with the family.

Clearly, visitation is an important element of a case plan if the objective is the child's return to the home. In light of this, plans for visitation must contain specific, realistic and concrete steps. Critical features include:

- An acceptable location for all parties
- A transportation plan to insure visitation
- Active encouragement by caseworkers.

#### ***A Local Experiment...***

Reuben Lindh Family Services introduced a new visitation pilot project in January 1998, which is designed to increase reunification of children in out-of-home care with their parents. This project provides a home-like environment for visitation purposes. An apartment furnished for active play, cooking, and other household activities, will provide a place that approximates "a

home" for visitation in neutral territory. County social workers supervise visits. This pilot will last six months, at which time it will be evaluated for cost-effectiveness and success in enabling more children to return to their homes. The program's success will also be determined by how satisfied clients are with the service. Each family will be asked for their feedback on a written survey following the completion of their visitation. For further information, call Bruce Minor, at (612) 721-1098. Back to top

**Proch, K. & Howard, J. (1986). Parental visiting of children in foster care. Social Work. May-June, 178-181.**

These authors reviewed 256 randomly selected case records of children in foster care in Illinois. Their findings reveal that there is a strong relationship between visiting plan and actual visitation by parents, but that the visiting plans have little connection with the actual needs of individual children and their families. Furthermore, the caseworkers' attitudes and behavior influence parental visitation. It was found that workers generally do little to discourage or encourage visitation. This study found that policy on visitation is not well integrated into current child welfare practice.

**Mech, E.V. (1985). Parental visiting and foster care placement. Child Welfare, 64 (1), 67-72.**

In this article, Mech looks at the correlation between frequency of parental visits with children in foster care and the length of duration of those children's placement in foster care. The author analyzes the results by race, ethnicity and geographical region in the country, using a national sample survey conducted by WESTSTAT. His findings consistently point to an inverse relationship between frequency of visits and length of stay in foster care, across race and geographical location. The association between parental contact and time in placement was strongest for African American families. Caucasian families reflected similar outcomes of relationship between the two variables. The correlation for Hispanic families was less pronounced. These findings are consistent with those of other studies, showing that although 50+% of children in foster placement are not visited, frequent parental visiting is positively correlated with fewer months spent in foster homes. Mech (1985) cautions that interpretations of the importance of parental visitation are based on essentially one study of 1,559 children. He urges that further study be conducted regarding this issue.

*Despite the wide recognition of the importance of parental visitation, almost no visiting patterns have been established as the norm.*

**Barnum, R. (1987). Clinical experience: Understanding controversies in visitation. Journal of American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 26 (5), 788-792.**

This article focuses on difficulties and emotional reactions caused by visitation, on the part of biological parents as well as children. The author argues that visitation is not inherently all good or all bad, but what's most important is to understand the cause behind a child's regression following parental visitation, or why a particular parent responds to visitation in a stressful

manner. The author illustrates that making hasty or blanket judgments can be dangerous either in leading the practitioner to make an inaccurate assumption about harm being caused, or to overlook harm occurring. In order for practitioners to make these judgments:

- Barnum recommends that if a visitation problem arises, an adequate assessment be conducted of the child as well as the custodial and visitation contexts.
- Barnum argues that each context plays an important role in stressful or regressive behavior demonstrated by the child.
- Taking the assessment information into account, the practitioner should explore the source of the problem with each party, focusing on the proposed value of the visitation, while determining what is behind the problem.

**Hess, P.; Mintun, G.; Moelhman, A.; & Pitts, G. (1992). The family connection center: An innovative visiting program. *Child Welfare*, 71 (1), 77-88.**

In light of the importance of family visits with children in out-of-home care in determining whether the family can be reunited, the authors urge that means to facilitate this interaction be made available. They describe a purchase-of-service arrangement that enables a voluntary agency to handle a portion of the visiting process for a public agency in a coordinated operation. Referred to as the Family Connection Center, a separately funded unit of the voluntary agency offers a visiting service for children of divorce whose parents are at odds with each other.

- The children and families served by the center typically visit more frequently and more consistently than they did before they began their contact with the center. Some children were not visited at all before their referral to the center.

**Simms, M.D.; & Bolden, B.J. (1991). The family reunification project: Facilitating regular contact among foster children, biological families, & foster care families. *Child Welfare*, 70 (6), 679-690.**

The authors raise the concern about high recidivism of placements for children who were visited by parents during their first stay in foster care and returned to their homes. Simms & Bolden (1991) describe a pilot program that works to address this issue. Targeting permanency as its ultimate goal, the Family Reunification Project (FRP) ran for 16 weeks between March and June of 1989. FRP worked to provide a supportive, educational environment for both biological parents and foster parents, to nurture the relationship between parents and children, and to provide services to parents once reunification occurred. During two-hour visits, the foster parents and biological parents had a one-hour session with separate groups. The biological parents also met for a one-hour structured session with their children.

- A critical component of this program was the coordination between the child welfare agency and other community agencies to provide a supportive atmosphere for the biological parents. Also, communication between the project and agencies involved contributed to how the project was perceived. Biological parents viewed the program quite positively.

- Incorporating group and individual activities for parents and their children as well as the presence of skilled professionals to teach and model interactive skills had beneficial results.
- Based on economic, employment and support factors of the biological families discovered during project implementation, it is recommended that an FRP-type project be administered to parents, children and foster parents for a duration of at least 9-12 months in order to have an impact on reunification success.
- From this pilot project, it is estimated that it costs \$2,000 per child over a year's time to serve 100 children, which compares favorably with the current cost of foster care.

**Davis, I.; Landverk, J.; Newton, R.; Ganger, W. (1996). Parental visiting and foster care reunification. Children and Youth Services Review, 18 (4-5), 363-382.**

The authors find that a child visited by the mother was ten times more likely to be reunited with family although the majority of children who were visited by both mother and father at court-recommended level were reunified. Hence, parental visiting is a very powerful factor in the decision to reunify the child. African American children are at a disadvantage compared to the Hispanic and Anglo-American children at the parental visiting level. This study also confirms that although fathers visit their children less often than mothers, their visits were "strongly related to reunification." The study suggests more attention and resources need to be paid to the level of visits by fathers.

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