



Innovative Practice in Foster Child Visitation:

A Review of the Literature for

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Introduction

Parental visitation of the child in foster care serves to maintain family links during a difficult period in the lives of both parents and children. According to child welfare law and theory over the last decade, *permanency* or stabilizing the life of a child in foster care is the highest value in out-of-home placement. This permanency value requires the caseworker to plan concurrently for both termination of parental rights and the reunification of the child with its biological parents. Both convention and research suggest that reunification with the family of origin is in most circumstances the higher value in concurrent planning, and that family visits predict this outcome. This essay will review the literature on best practices in family visitation while the child resides outside the authority of the parents, whatever the final case disposition. Note that the clinical criteria used to determine if visits are advised, and the intensity or duration of such visits, will not be addressed in order to concentrate on elements of the visitation process itself. Generally speaking, with the advent of supervised visitation it is now extremely rare for workers to prohibit any contact between parent and child.

Visitation may be the most delicately complicated portion of a foster care plan, and yet the family visit is often not afforded the attention it needs in the literature or among workers. The traumatic effects on children of the transition into foster care is well documented, as are the negative effects of many transfers either between foster homes or between biological parents and foster homes. *An ultimate positive outcome of visitation is mitigation of this trauma consequent to the transition to the out-of-home care situation.* As such, the first goal of visitation is provision of continuity for the child in care. Additionally, visitation is a crucial diagnostic tool for the caseworker, assisting both the worker, the foster family, and the biological family to assess the child's needs. Finally, parental participation in visiting can mitigate the traumatic effects of separation for them, and helps parents assume the role of active participants in the process of ultimate case disposition. In this respect, visitation can empower both parents and child that decisions made about their relationship will be completed with appropriate consideration of their input.

The essay ends by describing a provocative concept providing us with what may be a more sophisticated understanding of visitation during out-of-home placement. This concept is built upon the well-documented notion that some families may never have the skills or capacity to parent full-time. Some form of metered visitation arrangement while the child remains in long-term substitute care may be the appropriate permanent goal for all involved. At first glance this concept suggests a return to the

old revolving door practice that has been soundly rejected in favor of permanency. The new concept differs from the old in that greater care and sensitivity to the needs and capacities of families is paramount. This concept may ultimately represent a third or middle-road between the two options of reunification and termination of parental rights. Most radically, it changes our conception of case disposition from a more primitive “two-valued” orientation (reunification or TPR) to a continuum, or “many-valued” orientation that may better serve the best interests of the child.

The Stages of a Family Visit

Family visitation can be organized as three interrelated stages over time: preparation and planning, the visit itself, and the follow-up.

Preparation and planning is the period where logistic details of the visit are fleshed out and agreed upon. The success of this initial stage is essential to the success of the two following stages, since without the foundation of proper planning the visit has greater likelihood to result in negative, rather than positive, outcomes. The second stage is *the visit itself*. Elements of the family visit itself can be highly variable and only a few concepts for visits will be discussed in this summary. The last stage of the visitation is the *examination of the consequences*. Since the visit is a diagnostic tool for the caseworker, it is important that this part of the visitation be properly carried out and documented.

Preparation and Planning

Despite the fact that time spent on planning for the visit is the best predictor of a good outcome, workers perceive pre-visit planning as time consuming, and may rush through the task to avoid the rancor that may occur among the involved parties. Foster parents sometimes oppose visits, biological parents often want to see more of their child than the caseworker deems wise, and the worker is practically by definition overextended and unable to give the matter his or her full consideration. Once the decision is made that a family visit is in the best interests of the child, the worker should proceed to determine the location of the visit. There are four general categories of locations: the foster home, the biological parents’ home, a public forum, and a specifically designed meeting space.

The foster home can be highly awkward, since the biological parents and the foster parents may not mesh well, and this tension can disturb the child, who may already be feeling divided loyalties between foster parents and biological parents. *The biological parents’ home* is good from the point of view of rebuilding a family environment, but it is harder for the caseworker to control, and so there is

more potential for negative situations to develop. *Public places* have the benefit that they can potentially recapture a family environment, and have the advantage that they are more controlled than a private home. Meeting in public places can be harder to plan for, so families requiring significant amounts of structure may have trouble with the option.

A specifically designed meeting place offers, from the diagnostic perspective, the best possible situation. It allows the family to meet in a neutral space, with no previous associations. The interactions can be as free form or as structured as the family needs them to be, and the caseworker can more easily be part of the scenario without seeming unduly out of place. Since toys and games are provided by the facility, playthings will be both safe and appropriate for the child. Ultimately, judgment about place must be balanced with the best interests of the child and its relationship to the parents, with diagnostic needs taking second place to this primary consideration.

The timing and duration of the visit are also important to determine prior to the visit. By and large, families moving towards physical reunification should be allowed longer and longer stays with the child to smoothly ease the transition back into the family. In this way reunification can be seen as simply the culmination of the visitation process. In families where physical reunification is not advised, the visits may need to be shorter, aimed more at either giving the parents an opportunity to practice under supervision the parenting skills they are learning, or simply to maintain the attachment between the child and his or her parents.

Transportation recurs in the articles as a too-often ignored factor in the outcome of a visitation program. While there are cases where the biological parents cannot meet their visitation commitments even with available transportation, evidence shows a planned and reliable form of transportation greatly decreases absenteeism among the parents. If the parents do not have independent and reliable means of transportation, it is important that the meeting site be located near a public transportation line, or that agencies be prepared to provide transportation for parents.

Psychological preparation of parents is also shown to predict a positive outcome. The visit can be a 'teachable moment' for parents about child-rearing techniques. For many parents little guidance is needed on how to deal with their child in day-to-day situations, but parents may need to discuss the differences between a visit and normal interactions. Since the child is under greater than normal stress, it is important for parents not to be discouraged by aggressive or other disruptive behaviors. Preventing the buildup of unrealistic expectations will greatly improve parents' confidence both in their ability to parent, which is usually badly shaken by the child's removal, and the sense of being "under the

microscope” during a visit. Foster parents also require consideration; they may only see the disruptive behavior of the child upon its return from the visit, and thus come to view the visits as a negative encounters that serve only to increase the child’s stress. Foster parents should be considered partners in the process so they do not unconsciously sabotage a visitation program.

Equally important is the preparation of the child, who is feeling a myriad of conflicting emotions and may well be unsure how to deal with them. Workers should recognize this situation and acknowledge the child’s feelings, being especially sensitive to loyalty tensions engendered by the child’s positive feelings toward both the biological and foster families.

Lastly the level of caseworker involvement needs consideration. As a family moves towards physical reunification, the level of caseworker involvement should decrease appropriately. However, due to the volatile nature of the early visits, the presence of a caseworker who is more aware of all parties’ strains can help smooth the transition to visiting rather than full time living together. For families in need of help with parenting, the caseworker or visitation supervisor can model good parenting for the biological parents. The supervisor can also help coach the parents in parenting techniques and give advice as needed.

The education of the parents may be an important component of the visitation experience. For parents who lack important skills needed to manage their child, enrollment in some form of parenting class is important if physical reunification is the desired outcome. With the knowledge from these classes, the parents will be able to make the most of their visit, as well as demonstrate to the case worker that they are developing the skills they need to take care of the child.

The Visit

Visits can fall along a continuum from quite informal to quite formal. Only the more formal supervised and semi-supervised encounters will be discussed in this summary. Families who need to develop a collection of positive experiences to build on before they can improve their relationship should focus more on a structured activity, most beneficially under the guidance of a third party. This limits the potential for negative interactions between the parents and the child, since the visit supervisor or facilitator can intervene with both the child and parent and deflect negative situations before they occur. When parents are involved in independent play with their child, the supervisor can assist by demonstrating playing with the child, as well as presenting ideas for dealing with the child’s attention span, a challenge for visiting parents identified in the literature. Workers should consider, depending

upon the child's age, a combination of both structured and independent play, including a scheduled snack break during longer visits. Finally, the opening and closing portions of the visit should be considered because these transitions represent the most stressful parts of the visit. For example, the worker or visit supervisor is well-advised to structure a ritual greeting and goodbye.

The Post-Visit Period

Post-visit documentation is the final area of investigation found in the literature. Workers should seek input from all parties involved, emphasizing perceived successes and challenges during the visit, and desires and goals for the future. These meetings provide the caseworker with an opportunity to provide feedback for both foster and biological parents, and a chance to outline the worker's goals for future visits. Similarly, discussion with the child can help alleviate some of the anxiety the child will be feeling around placement future. Discussing the visit with the foster parents can also help, as another way to re-enforce the importance of the visits for the child and to help prepare these parents for any difficult behaviors.

Conclusion

The goals of visitation are to ease the transition of the child in substitute care, to maintain the family connection while the child is out of the parent's authority, to help assess child-parent problems, and to serve as a means of involving biological parents in outcome decisions. With these goals in mind, there are four considerations that stand out among the articles reviewed:

- *First*, more thought and planning should go into the visiting program generally, and plans should not remain static over time, but instead adapt themselves to the changing needs of the child and biological family.
- *Second*, biological parents need more support than is usually afforded them, both physical (in the form of transportation and accommodation around meeting space if necessary), and emotional/social (in the form of feedback, encouragement, advice and education).
- *Third*, more consideration to foster family buy-in to visitation is essential since opposition by foster parents can only increase the anxiety and stress the child feels. It is important to enlist foster parents as allies right away, and to include them as much as possible in planning and execution of the visit. This can be accomplished through consistent contact and education about the goals of fostering and the role of visitation in fostering.

- *Fourth*, visits should be better tailored to the needs of the child and the skills of the family, and that families should not be expected to do more than they can, nor should they be prevented from doing all they can.

The Continued Contact Model

As a final note, the concept of *reunification* deserves some thought. A number of articles challenged the conventional definition of reunification, posing an alternative definition that would better achieve the best interests of the child. Rather than consider reunification as a binary system (either unified or terminated), choices around case disposition should instead be seen as a continuum, and the goal should be to achieve the appropriate amount of contact between the parents and the child. Parents who are unable to take full responsibility for the child should not necessarily be judged inadequate and removed from the child's life. The literature suggests that under the right circumstances children are quite capable of handling a more separated relationship with their biological parents, if that relationship is more beneficial to the child than full physical reunification. In the *Continued Contact model*, intensity and duration of family contact consider the interaction between the child's age or emotional capacity and family strengths.

Innovations in Foster Child Visitation: An Annotated Bibliography 2004

Cantos, A., Gries, L. & Slis V. (1997). Behavioral Correlates of Parental Visiting During Family Foster Care. *Child Welfare*, 76(2), 309-329.

This study of 68 cases correlated frequency of parental visits with a decrease in externalizing behaviors. They also discussed how frequent family visits have a more complex effect on internalizing behaviors. Children can feel conflicted and guilty if they have a positive relationship with the foster family since they sometimes see it as disloyalty. The study was unable to demonstrate causal relationships.

Carlo, P. (1993). Parent Education vs. Parent Involvement: Which Type of Efforts Work Best to Reunify Families? *Journal of Social Service Research*, 17(½), 135-149.

This article studied the effect of education and visitation programs taken together and separately, and found that the best result is gained from a combination of the two. In addition, educating the parents can lead to a change in relationship between parents and staff, with the staff treating the parents with more respect and the parents understanding more about what the workers do. This study examined 54 children

Davis, I., Landsverk, J. Newton, R., & Ganger, W. (1996). Parental Visiting and Foster Care Reunification. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18(4/5), 363-382.

This article discussed the fact that children fostered in homes of biological kin are usually better able to deal with the separation, and that parental visits usually work better when children are in kinship care.

Gardner, H. The Concept of Family: Perceptions of Children in Family Foster Care. (1996). *Child Welfare*, 75(2), 161-183.

This article discusses children's perceptions of their "Family." It suggests that there is not a strong desire on the child's part necessarily to be reunited with its biological parents. When asked what their ideal family situation would be, the number of children who wanted to be significantly closer to their biological parents as opposed to their foster parents was not significant. The authors suggest caution when generalizing findings because the study was only of 43 court ordered foster care children who were in long-term foster care.

Haight, W., Black, J., Mangelsdorf, S., Giorgio, G., Tata, L., Schoppe, S., & Szewczyk, M. (2002).

Making Visits Better: The Perspectives of Parents, Foster Parents, and Child Welfare Workers. *Child Welfare*, 81(2), 173-202.

The authors discuss the importance of getting all members of the child's support network on the same page, because foster parents, biological parents, and case workers often have conflicting ideas of what they want, and of what they think the others want. This confusion can lead to jealousy, resentment, and mistrust, which can harm the child and jeopardize reunification.

Hess, P., Mintun, G., Moelhman, A., & Pitts, G. (1992). The Family Connection Center: An Innovative Visiting Program. *Child Welfare* 71(1), 77-88.

This article discusses an Indiana agency that sub-contracts running and organizing visitations between biological parents and their children who are in foster care, as well as children and parents involved in difficult divorces. The program was highly successful, particularly because it decreased caseworker workload, which was already quite high in the area. The article discusses how the agency worked and how its program could be copied in other settings.

Hess, P. & Proch, K. (1993). Visiting: The Heart of Reunification. In B.A. Pine, R. Warsh, & A.N. Maluccio (1993). *Together Again: Family Reunification in Foster Care*, pp. 119-140. Washington, DC: The Child Welfare League of America.

Hess and Proch argue in this essay that visits should increase in frequency over time as reunification nears. Their study suggests this increases the ease of the transition for the child. They also argue that the family should not be conceived narrowly as parents, but siblings, family, and friends, among others. They also argue that reunification should be thought of not only physical reunification, but of achieve the appropriate amount of contact with the biological contact, whether that is monthly visits or actually returning to their home.

Loar, L. Making Visits Work. (1998). *Child Welfare*, 77(1), 41-57.

This "think piece" article discusses the overestimation of parenting skills that the researcher sees in modern visitation design. Caseworkers assume the parents know more than they do, so they simply work on setting up safe places for visits without proper consideration of what will happen during the visit. This can result in negative visits. Organization, planning, and education are essential parts of setting up a visit, factors often overlooked due to high case loads.

Maluccio, A., Fein, E., Davis, I. (1994). *Child Welfare*, 73(5), 489-503.

This article is primarily a descriptive study of other research into reunification, providing primarily descriptive statistics about the children, but also pointing out gaps in the research, most specifically the fact that there is not a solid study on case worker education vs. reunification, at least as of 1994.

McWey, L. & Mullis, A. (2004). *Improving the Lives of Children in Foster Care: The Impact of Supervised Visitation*. *Family Relations*, 53(3), 293-300.

This article discusses the role of visitation as a way of maintaining and reforming attachments between biological parents and children. Children with more frequent visits were less likely to be termed "developmentally delayed." The authors conclude that it is essential for child visitation to be supported by both the case worker and the foster parents. This study examined 123 children.

Perkins, D. & Ansay, S. (1998). *The Effectiveness of a Visitation Program in Fostering Visits with Noncustodial Parents*. *Family Relations*, 47(3), 253-258.

This article primarily focuses on the nuts and bolts of visitation. The authors suggest that documentation of visits, and the periods before and after each visit are crucial. Also that the supervising agency make transportation available to parents and children, as that dramatically decreases no-shows. The study of 47 cases also found that education should be a major factor in any visitation program, since it helps parents develop the skills they need.

Sanchirico, A. & Jablonka, K. (2000). *Keeping Foster Children Connected to Their Biological Parents: The Impact of Foster Parent Training and Support*. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17(3), 185-203.

Since foster parents often have mixed or skewed perceptions of the biological parents of the children they are fostering, it is important that they be brought onto the side of reunification through education by the caseworkers about the importance of reunification for the child's long term benefit. When education does take place, visits by biological parents work much better.

Simms, M & Bolden, B. (1991). The Family Reunification Project: Facilitating Regular Contact Among Foster Children, Biological Families, and Foster Families. *Child Welfare*, 70 (6), 679-690.

Simms and Bolden's article is a discussion of a 16 week pilot program in which foster parents, biological parents, and children in care were brought together in a neutral setting and given support during the visit, in addition to group counseling for the biological and foster parents. Mostly discussion of how it was done rather than how well it worked since the sample group of eight foster children was too small for a lot of conclusions to be drawn.

Tam, T & Ho, M. (1996). Factors influencing the Prospect of Children Returning to Their Parents from Out-of-Home Care. *Child Welfare*, 75(3), 253-268.

Tam and Ho's article is a study of 877 children in out of home care in Hong Kong. They found that the single largest factor in determining whether a child would go home was parental involvement. They theorized that an increase in parental involvement led to less chance of marginalization, so the birth parents were more motivated to get their children back. The authors discussed parents continuing their parental role by dispensing pocket money, signing legal forms for their children, etc.

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), 75-84.

This article is a literature review of studies that support the finding that increasing the frequency of visits increases the frequency of reunification.