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Informational Letter

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To: Local District Commissioners
 Executive Directors of Voluntary Agencies
Issuing Division/Office: Division of Development and Prevention Services
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Subject: Family Visiting for Children in Out- of- Home Care: A Practice Paper
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 Local District Directors of Service
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Previous ADMs/INFs	Releases Cancelled	Dept. Regs.	Soc. Serv. Law & Other Legal Ref.	Manual Ref.	Misc. Ref.
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I. Purpose

Family visiting for children in foster care and their families is recognized as being critically important to achieving timely reunification and child permanency. Research studies regarding the experiences of children in foster care have consistently demonstrated that visiting is associated with positive outcomes and shortened lengths of stay.

As New York State strives to improve its child-centered, family-focused child welfare practices in order to achieve better outcomes for children and families, agencies are encouraged to review their current practices related to family visiting. The attached resource paper is designed to provide guidance to agencies as they consider ways in which their family visiting practices could be strengthened and contribute to more rapid achievement of permanency.

II. Background

With the development of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Program Improvement Plan (PIP) approved by the federal government in April 2003, New York State has committed to supporting operational applications of child-centered, family-focused practice. This plan lays out a blueprint for the support of casework practices and program models that are effective, evidence-based approaches to practice. Frequent, meaningful family visiting consistent with the safety of the children is an integral part of this effort. Family visiting models of practice from within New York State and from around the country were reviewed and compared to develop the attached information.

III. Program Implications

Social services districts and voluntary agencies that elect to implement family visiting practice improvements will need to assess change readiness and the potential training needs within their agency. Districts and agencies in need of assistance are encouraged to contact their Regional Office.

Larry G. Brown s/s

Issued By:

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Family Visiting for Children in Out-of-Home Care

Family visiting within child welfare refers to face-to-face contact between children in out-of-home placement and their parents, siblings, relatives, and other persons significant in their lives. Visiting plans that meet the children's developmental needs and allow for safe, frequent contact between them and members of their family should be created for all children in care. These plans should be an integral part of case planning, premised on the permanency goals, and careful risk assessments to these children, as well as careful risk assessments of their communities, if necessary.

The best predictors of successful reunification are the frequency and quality of visits between children in foster care with their family members and/or discharge resources. When reunification is the goal, the visiting plans should encourage a progressive increase in the parents' or discharge resources' responsibilities for the daily care of the child(ren), consistent with the safety of the children. When reunification is not the goal, the visiting plans can help family members understand and accept alternative permanency plans. Regardless of the permanency goal, family visiting:

- creates, maintains, or strengthens family relationships;
- protects the health and safety of the children;
- enhances children's well-being and lessens the impact of separation;
- affirms the importance of family in the child(ren)'s lives;
- promotes accurate assessment of family interactions, strengths and risk to children; and
- provides the times and places for family members to reinforce existing parenting skills as well as to learn and practice new behaviors and ways of relating to each other.

Family visiting is enhanced when children are placed with their siblings and near their families whenever possible. It is, additionally, important to supplement face-to-face visiting with other forms of contact including telephone calls and the exchange of correspondence such as letters, photos, and gifts.

Many children today are placed in kinship care. When children are placed with relatives, visiting plans are still necessary. It cannot be assumed that, simply because these children are living with relatives, visiting will occur and meet the purposes of visiting as stated above. Visiting in kinship situations may require greater support due to the complexity and stresses in some family relationships.

Principles of Good Visiting Practice

- The first consideration in establishing a family visiting plan is the safety of the child. A thorough risk assessment is a critical step in the development of the plan.

- The primary purpose of visiting in most cases is to allow children to maintain relationships with their parents, siblings, and others who cared for them prior to placement. With younger children, more frequent contact is necessary in order to maintain relationships. Especially for young children, frequency is more important than length.
- Visiting facilitates permanency planning for children in foster care, whether it speeds reunification or helps decision-making in cases of alternative permanency goals.
- Visiting plans should change over time dependent on progress toward reunification, with visits typically moving from being supervised to unsupervised, increasing in length, and supporting more responsibility on the part of the parents and/or discharge resources.
- Visiting plans always must be consistent with maintaining the safety of the children.
- Family members (including the foster children when old enough) and foster care providers should be actively involved in the development of visiting plans. Foster families are integral to the plan development. Full involvement of all parties not only increases the probability that all participants understand and will support the plans, but also enables the plans to take into account all participants' needs, resources, and concerns.
- Agency efforts should be directed toward determining optimal visiting plans that will best meet children's and parents' individual needs, and that will complement other aspects of their case plans.
- Visiting plans should be written and copies provided to everyone who is involved in carrying out these plans.
- Visiting should never be used as a reward or punishment. Changes in visiting arrangements should reflect assessments of risk to the children and progress toward achieving the permanency goals.
- Visiting should occur in settings that encourage the most natural interaction between family members while minimizing any risk that may exist to the children or communities. It can and should include parental and family participation in normally occurring events in the children's lives; for example, school conferences, medical appointments, church programs, and extracurricular activities.
- Opportunities for foster families to provide mentoring and role modeling on parental practices can often best occur in the foster family's home. This vital role can facilitate a reunification or decision to make an alternative permanency plan.
- Reunification should not occur until families have safely completed unsupervised visits of gradually increasing length in the children's homes. Without extensive visits, the actual changes achieved and risks to the children cannot be adequately assessed.
- When reunification is not the plan, consideration should be given to the impact of continued or discontinued contact between the children and family on the children's emotional well-being, needs for attachment, stability, and sense of security.

Case-Specific Planning and Evaluation of Visits

Presented below are some questions caseworkers and supervisors can ask themselves as they plan and evaluate visits. Answers to these questions will help determine how frequently visits should occur, when and where they should be held, who should be involved in them, whether supervision is necessary, and whether changes the visiting plans are needed.

The questions below are organized around children, parents, and foster parents. They can be adapted as needed to reflect the particular case situation; such as, placements in kinship care or to support visits with persons other than parents.

For the Child:

- **Child's significant relationships:**
Whom does the child define as family?
What relationships are important to maintain or enhance through visiting, including both those that existed before placement and those that might be created as a result of a diligent search?
- **Child's chronological and developmental age:**
How frequently does the child need to have contact with parents/siblings/others in order to sustain or enhance relationships?
How able is the child to care for self?
How vulnerable is the child to potentially harmful situations?
How able is the child to structure his or her own activities?
- **Child's safety:**
How is the safety of the child evaluated, supported and maintained during visits?
Must the visitation plan be modified to maintain the safety of the child?
- **Child's requests:**
What is the child asking for in terms of visits, and what does this mean?
- **Child's reaction to visits:**
What reactions--positive and negative--does the child have to visits, and what is the meaning of these reactions?
If the reaction appears to be negative, is it a normal response to separation or does it suggest a need for change in the visiting plan or the way the child, family and/or foster caregiver are prepared for the visit?
- **Child's developmental tasks:**
How can the activities/interactions during visits enhance the child's developmental progress?
- **Child's therapeutic needs:**
If applicable, how can visits help achieve therapeutic needs?

- **Child's schedule:**
How can visits encourage parents and others to be involved in the child's daily routines and in special events?
How can visits ease the separation reactions by beginning and ending at natural transition points within the child's day?

For the Parents:

- **Parents' behaviors and abilities related to reason for placement:**
How can visits promote and support the changes necessary for the child to be safe in the parents' home?
How can visits enable assessment of the child's safety in the home?
How can visits support the parents' ability to meet the needs of their child?
How can visits support positive attachment to their children?
- **Parents' ability to follow through with visiting plan:**
To what extent has the parent followed through with visiting?
If the parent has failed to follow through, what does this mean? Are there barriers to visiting that must be addressed?
Are there unmet transportation needs?
- **Parents' requests:**
What does the parent want in terms of visits? Are adequate efforts being made to accommodate these requests?
- **Parents' past endangering behaviors:**
Is there a history of attempted abduction; threatened or attempted harm to the child or other family members; leaving the child unsupervised or in harmful situations?
- **Parents' reactions to visits:**
What reactions-- positive and negative-- does the parent have to visits, and what is the meaning of these reactions?
Is the parent able to express his/her reactions appropriately and in a manner that is not harmful to the child?
- **Parents' behaviors and reactions related to safety of the child:**
Does the parent's failure to follow through with the visiting plan, past endangering behaviors, or reactions to visits affect the safety of the child during visits?
Based upon such parental behaviors and reactions, must the visiting plan be modified to maintain the safety of the child?
- **Parents' schedules:**
How can the parent's schedule be reasonably accommodated?
Does the visiting schedule support other expectations of the parents, such as work and the provision of other services the parents may need?

Family Relationships and Interactions:

How do family members interact during visits?

What arrangements can minimize stress or conflict between family members, and support the most natural interactions possible?

What arrangements will encourage the parent to interact with the child rather than with other people during visits?

How can visit arrangements tap into and build upon the family's strengths and social support network?

Foster Parents:

- Foster parents' capacity to support visiting:
 - What are the foster parents' attitudes toward the child's parents?
 - Do the foster parents value the child/parent relationship?
 - Can the foster parents objectively record visit interactions?
 - Are the foster parents able to provide mentoring and role modeling on parenting practices in a constructive and supportive manner?
 - Will the foster parents intervene appropriately in a visit if necessary?
 - What are the foster parents' resources in terms of time and ability to support natural family interactions between the child and parent?
 - Can the foster parents recognize their need for assistance, and are the foster parents comfortable asking for help? Do they know whom to contact?
- Foster family's schedule:
 - How can visit arrangements minimize disruption of the foster family's schedule, yet be responsive to parent's schedule and children's needs?
- Impact of visiting on other children in the foster home:
 - How disruptive are one child's visits to other children in the foster home?
 - Are there additional supports the foster parents need to manage the visits and the child's reactions to the visits?

Agency Self-Assessment of Visiting Practice

An important step in determining the benefit of undertaking improvements to visiting practices is for districts and agencies to explore their current values, expectations, and practices. Common themes among effective visiting models that are worthy of consideration include the following:

Purpose of visits:

- Do current visiting practices enhance the relationships between family members?
- Is the parent involved in the assessment of his/her own needs as well as the child's needs?
- Has the purpose, importance, and format of visits been discussed with the parent?

- Do current visiting plans clearly articulate roles and expectations for all involved?
- Are visiting plans written and copies provided to all involved?
- How is the parent included/consulted in discussions of the child's needs, and advised/updated regarding changes to these needs and how this impacts visiting?
- How is the parent's ability to meet the child's needs during visits assessed, supported, and enhanced?
- How will the parent be supported in developing skills to meet the child's needs and who will assist him/her in this?
- Do the visit activities and skill building complement other aspects of the case plan, such as participating in parenting skills classes/program?
- Does the visiting plan take into consideration the unique needs of the child, such as teenage children or children in residential care?

Frequency:

- Do visits begin as soon after placement as possible, preferably within one week of placement?
- Are visits frequent enough to maintain and enhance family relationships, and take into account the developmental needs of the child?
- Are visits frequent enough to allow the parents to enhance and demonstrate his/her ability to nurture and meet the child's needs?
- As cases progress toward reunification, do visits increase in duration and frequency and take place in family-friendly settings outside the agency?

Supervision:

- Is the lowest level of supervision being utilized that is consistent with the safety of the child, and a justification for this level of supervision documented?
- Are different levels of supervision being considered?
- Who would be most effective and appropriate to supervise the visit?
- Is the role of the visit supervisor defined and implemented in a way that facilitates parent/child interaction during visits while providing for safety?
- Is the level of supervision required reassessed often, at minimum every 2-3 months?
- Does the level of required supervision decrease over time in reunification cases, when consistent with maintaining the safety of the child?

Location:

- Does the visit setting allow for the most natural interactions safely possible?
- Do the visit setting and visit activities assist the parent in assuming responsibility for daily tasks and parenting duties?

Pre- and Post-Visit Communication with Parents:

- What kind of preparatory conversations are held with the parents before each visit? Who is responsible for communicating with the parents prior to the visits?
- Does the visiting schedule allow for visit-specific communication with the parents and feedback/debriefing soon after the visit?
- Is the plan amended when necessary based upon this feedback?

Pre- and Post-Visit Communication with the Child (appropriate to age and developmental level):

- What kind of preparatory conversations are held with the child before each visit? Who is responsible for communicating with the child prior to visits?
- What kind of post-visit conversations are held with the child? Who is responsible for this?
- What is the procedure to adjust the visit plan, if necessary, based upon these discussions?

Pre- and Post-Visit Communication with the Foster Parents:

- What is the role of foster parents within the agency's visiting practices?
- What kind of preparatory conversations are held with the foster parents before each visit? Who is responsible for communicating with the foster parents before visits?
- What kind of post-visit conversations are held with the foster parents? How, and by whom is this information used to adjust the plan, if necessary?
- How have the foster parents been prepared to assess and respond to the child's needs both before and after visits?

Communication with the Case Manager and/or Planner:

- When someone other than the case planner supervises the visit, how will the visit be documented? How will this information be shared with the case planner and others?

Siblings, Relatives, and Other Persons of Significance:

- Does current practice support the child's need to maintain and enhance relationships with siblings, relatives, and others persons of significance to the child?
- Are adequate efforts made to arrange visits with an incarcerated parent and/or non-traditional family members?

Court Orders:

- Local districts will additionally need to assess their relationship with the Family Court regarding court orders. A certain degree of flexibility regarding the level of supervision and frequency of visits is necessary to allow for plan adjustments that strive to meet the individual needs of the children and families.

Information Resources

- **ACS Family Visiting Resource Guide**

**New York City Administration for Children's Services
150 William Street, 4th Floor, Room 40-5
New York, New York 10038**

Contact: Ms. Tanya Krupat, Special Projects Coordinator

- **Colorado Child Welfare Handbook**

May be found on the website www.colorado.gov by selecting the following:

Website: colorado.gov

"Family, Health and Wellness"

"Child Welfare"

"Program Information"

"Colorado Child Welfare Practice Handbook"

"Appendix N- Family Visiting for Children in Foster Care"

<http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/cyf/cwelfare/CW%20Hndbk%20-%20APPX0N.pdf>

- **Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare**

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Request copy of Visitation Manual, issued March 1999