

# Resource Parent Guide



CHILDREN'S ROUNDTABLE INITIATIVE  
OFFICE OF CHILDREN & FAMILIES IN THE COURTS  
SUPREME COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA

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## Why are you giving me this booklet?

This handbook was developed to help you understand the process of children visiting with their family members while in out-of-home care. When a child is placed, frequent visitation must be arranged to keep the parent and child relationship strong.

Let us thank you for opening your heart and home to the children in your care. Whether you are a relative of the child or a non-relative caregiver, you are an important part of the team and your input is valued!

*This handbook contains information as to why visitation is important to children, family members and you. Information provided within includes:*

- How to make frequent visitation meaningful and purposeful
- Your role in visitation as a team member
- How to manage a child's reaction to visits
- How to build a relationship with the child's parents and other family members
- The development of a visitation plan
- New practices being implemented to assist caretakers

## What is the Value and Purpose of visitation?

In Pennsylvania visitation is a right, not a privilege, and should never be used as a punishment.

Children enter placement because of concerns with their family, serious enough, that the child's safety cannot be maintained while the child stays in their own home. Out-of-home placement is a devastating event for the child and the entire family. The trauma of separation can affect a child's learning, emotional, and behavioral well-being for a long time. Placement is also traumatic for parents and can affect their ability to function normally. So, it is critical that children be returned to their family as soon as safely possible. Visitation must remain a diligent focus from the beginning of the case until the clarity and legal timelines of the permanency goal become more clearly defined. Visitation is primarily conducted to enhance a child's well-being and maintain connections with family.

*The purpose of visitation between parents and their children is as follows:*

- To preserve or develop the parent/child bond
- To improve a healthy parent/child relationship
- To help the child deal with the trauma of being apart from their family
- To further evaluate family strengths and identify ways to help reduce concerns within the family

- To help the parent learn, improve, develop, and practice parenting skills
- To help parents understand what activities their child enjoys visitation is

Quality, meaningful visitation that happens often is important to maintaining the parent-child bond and getting a child home quickly.

## **What should I expect during the Visitation Planning process?**

Parents have a right to visit with their child while they are in out of home care. This right can only be taken away by a judge. The first visit should be scheduled within 3 days of a child entering out of home care. Some child welfare agencies arrange visitation themselves, others have a social services provider that handles their visitation arrangements. If your caseworker does not explain how visitation is handled in your county, you need to ask them for clarification.

No matter who handles the details of the visitation, a visitation plan must be created and included in the Child Permanency Plan for the Court's approval. The visitation plan should be developed by the family, with inclusion from extended family and kin and support from the professional team members, including you. While child welfare agencies may practice more than one type of family meeting, a Family Group Decision Making conference is encouraged, as the best process for a family to develop their visitation plan.

*The visitation plan should consider:*

- The child's age
- Safety and oversight of visitation
- Frequency and duration of visits
- Developmental needs of the child.
- Location of visitation
- Transportation needs
- Participants during the visits
- Any supportive services needed before, during or after the visitation

Development of the visitation plan is extremely important and as a resource parent, you need to participate as a team member. Team members should provide collaborative effort to strengthen and build families. Team members include extended family and kin, the county caseworker, service provider, health care providers, educational partners, Guardians ad litem, Parent Attorneys, caretakers and anyone else that the family feels would provide a support to their visitation needs. Team members demonstrate a commitment to a common goal, as developed by the family.

Once the plan is developed it will remain in place until circumstances necessitate changes. Plans could be altered due to changes in work schedules, treatment interventions, unsupervised contact and increased reunification efforts. Changes could also be necessary due to deteriorating circumstances with the parent. If something changes with regard to your circumstances, notify your case-worker so that a meeting can be convened. Visitation progress is always assessed at court reviews. Reports and testimony regarding visitation informs the court of the family's progress and recommendations for continued visitation.

## **Why do children benefit from frequent and meaningful visitation?**

*Frequent and meaningful visitation positively impacts a child's well-being by:*

- Establishes or supports a parent/child bond
- Assists with healthy attachment and eases the impact of separation
- Shows the child that their parents care about them
- Shows the child that their siblings are okay
- Calms the fears of children
- Allows children the opportunity to express anger, fear, and frustration
- Promotes and strengthens positive connections with family
- Supports child's psychological development
- Gives the child with hope of reunification or an understanding of why reunification is not possible
- Better adjustment to placement and decreased days in care
- Gives the child hope and enhances their emotional well-being
- Less likely to be referred to psychiatric services and to be prescribed psychotropic medication
- Less likely to commit delinquent acts or behave in an antisocial manner
- Are more likely to develop positive peer relationships and be liked by teachers

*Frequent visitation assists parents in the following ways:*

- Honors an existing bond and builds upon parent- child attachment
- Helps the parents feel more comfortable about the care of their child

- Decreases separation trauma experience by parents when their child is removed
- Involves parents in the child's everyday life
- Enhances their motivation to change
- Keeps them up to date with the child's development
- Helps parents acquire new skills and gives them an opportunity in which to practice parenting skills

Most importantly, frequent visitation between a child and parent is the strongest predictor of successful reunification. In addition to face-to-face visitation, it is recommended that children have other types of contact with their parents. This might include a parent attending their child's medical, educational or social events. In addition, this may include phone or approved computer contact, such as Skype or Face Time. Children benefit in situations where the resource parent and the biological family have regular contact outside of scheduled visitation.

Children need to stay connected to the people in their lives that they love and who love them. It is important that a child be able to safely visit with extended family and kin. It is important to remember that when children are removed from the home, they are removed from their culture, routine and traditions. For example, if a child has always celebrated their birthday at a grandparent's house, it will be very difficult for that child to not be connected to that tradition if they are placed outside of the home around their birthday. A child can also stay connected to their family by phone calls, letters and attendance at various events.

In Pennsylvania it is law that children and their siblings have regular visitation. A sibling who remains in the home, may attend visitations with the parent. If a child is placed in a different resource home or with family, it will be important for you to communicate with the other caregiver to ensure that frequent and meaningful visitation occurs between the siblings.

## **What are the normal expectations, emotions and feelings that occur before, during and after family visits?**

Children and parents can experience various emotions and behaviors before, during or after a visit occurs. Frequent and meaningful visitation reduces the trauma of separation.

*Some of the emotions or behaviors you may see before the visit are:*

- Patterns of sleep disturbances
- Anxiety
- Complaints of not feeling well
- Nervousness

- Excitement

*Some emotions or behaviors you may see during a visit may be (in the event that the visit occurs in your home or your presence):*

- A familiarity preference towards you, especially in infants
- Confusion about “how to act”
- Protectiveness over the parent
- Fears towards loyalty of parents and you
- Excitement of you and the parents being together

*Some emotions or behaviors you may see following a visit may be:*

- Sleep disturbance
- Crying and sadness
- Depression
- Anger
- Disappointment
- Withdrawal
- Anxiety
- Ignoring you and your family
- Significant acting-out (i.e. tantrums)

All of the above emotions and behaviors are normal. Communication between you and the parent can help a child feel more comfortable about their visits and emotions.

*You can help to create a positive visitation experience for the child by doing some pre-visit activities, such as:*

- Make sure the child knows when the visits will happen, where they will be held and which family members will attend

- Make all possible efforts to adjust your schedule so you can take the child to the visit
- Talk to the child about what they would like to do at the visit, games they may want to play, things they may want to talk about and communicate these things with the parent, caseworker or visitation provider
- Establish visitation rituals with the child, prior to the visit, such as: developing a “good-bye word,” playing a specific word game, coloring the parent a picture, role-play who will be at the visit
- Allow the child to take one of their favorite toys or stuffed animals for comfort
- Allow the child to take school work they can show to their parent

After the visit, talk to the child about how they are feeling. It is very possible that the child will be sad at having to say good-bye, so reassure them that what they are feeling is normal and encourage them to look forward to the next visit, including telling them when the next time they will talk and visit with their parent. If they have questions about the visit, be as honest as you can, while keeping in mind the developmental age of the child. You should contact your provider or caseworker if you need additional help or support. At the end of this handbook, you will find a place for you to record important contact information.

## **How will I be involved in the actual visit?**

Frequent, structured visitation is a key component of concurrent planning, which was first introduced as part of the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997 and further enforced in child welfare agencies through the recent implementation of the Concurrent Planning Bulletin, effective July 2014. In response to concurrent planning requirements, agencies will be increasing the frequency and duration of visitation for children and families. Resource families, including kinship caretakers, will be an extremely important component as visitation becomes more frequent. Child Welfare Agencies will be expecting resource families to have expanded contact with the child’s biological family, when safety does not interfere. Communication and information sharing between resource parents and biological parents will be critical to ensuring the child’s transition and adjustment to placement.

*Some activities to facilitate this interaction outside of regularly scheduled visitation are:*

- Attending doctor appointments together
- Attending school meetings and extracurricular activities together
- Inviting parents to birthday parties and holiday celebrations



- Phone calls and approved use of computer communication, such as Skype Face Time
- Sending letters and pictures to the parents
- Sharing information about the child's favorite foods, things that calm the child when upset, what scares the child, favorite activities of the child, etc.
- Offering to have visits occur at your home, when safe and approved by the court

One practice that is evolving when trying to facilitate communication between resource families and biological families is holding "Ice Breaker" meetings. The meeting is held within a few days of the child entering placement and is attended by the resource family, the parent, the caseworker and a facilitator. Why the child entered placement is not discussed, instead, the discussion focuses on the likes/dislikes of the child, the child's routine in both homes, the structure of the homes, sleeping habits, pets and issues of religion. A Family Group Decision Making Conference is a great way for families conduct "Ice Breaker" meetings and also allows other family members to be of support. Ask your caseworker about the possibility of having an "Ice Breaker" or Family Group Decision Making Conference.

## **What happens if a parent misses a visit?**

As previously mentioned, visitation creates various emotions for both the child and parent. One of the most disappointing situations for a child is a parent cancelling or "no-showing" a visit. Reassure the child that there are lots of reasons missed visits happen and that none of them have to do with the parent not wanting to see the child. If a missed visit happens, first comfort the child and be careful not to blame or make negative comments about the parent. When the child hears negative comments about the parent, they can feel ashamed, guilty, and hopeless and may establish an emotional distance between you and their parent. They may feel they cannot trust you to express their true feelings. A child's love for their parents is innate and most often not logically calculated by the parent's ability or inability to parent. Therefore, your forgiveness of a parent's mistakes can positively impact the child. If this becomes difficult to do, you should talk with your caseworker and ask for additional support on this issue.

It is important to be aware that just as the child may experience grief and loss due to their placement, the parent is experiencing the same. Each visit begins with a reunion and ends with another separation. Some reasons parents may miss visits include:

- It is too painful to say "good-bye" to their children after each visit
- Protecting their child from the pain of having to say "good-bye" after each visit
- They do not have consistent transportation
- Struggles with guilt over the circumstances of placement
- An inconsistent work schedule

- Inadequate feelings that the resource family is doing a better job with their child
- Depression, Anxiety or other mental health needs that interfere with their functioning
- Fear that they cannot respond to the question, “When am I coming home?”
- They are uncomfortable with the visitation location and/or oversight
- Feelings of being judged

Often the agency will try to reschedule a missed visit for another time. If the parent consistently misses or “no-shows” their visit, with no explanation, the agency may not reschedule the visit. It is important to remember that the frequent and meaningful visits are not just for the parent, but for the well-being of the child, who experiences less separation trauma and increased positive behaviors while in placement outside of the home.

In the event that you need to cancel a scheduled visit due to an illness or emergency, please contact the child welfare agency as early as possible to allow time for a rescheduled visit that would not interfere with the parent and child’s regular interaction.

## **Who can I talk to if I have a concern about visitation?**

If you have a concern regarding the visitation that is occurring between the child you are caring for and their family, you need to speak to your caseworker. If your concern has to do with safety, please contact someone immediately. *Immediate concerns of safety could include:*

- The child being hit during a visit
- Information about the child being sexually assaulted
- The child not being fed, not receiving their medication, the parent being incapacitated etc. during an unsupervised visit

If your concern is not safety related, you may contact the appropriate person listed at the end of this booklet, including your direct contact, if you are a resource parent through a provider.

You are a valued partner in the success of the child’s visitation. Please take the time to familiarize yourself with this booklet and discuss any questions that you may have with the appropriate contact. Finally, thank you for opening your home and heart to a child!