

Pennsylvania Resource Parent Handbook



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**VISITATION IS A RIGHT,
NOT A PRIVILEGE**

- They worry about responding to the question, “When am I coming home?”
- They are uncomfortable with the visitation location and/or oversight
- They feel judged and/or rejected

Often the agency will try to reschedule a missed visit for another time. If the parent consistently misses their visit, with no explanation, the agency may not reschedule the visit. It is important to remember that frequent, meaningful visits are not just for the parent, but for the well-being of the child. Children who visit regularly and in a meaningful way tend to experience less separation trauma and increase positive behaviors while in placement.

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.

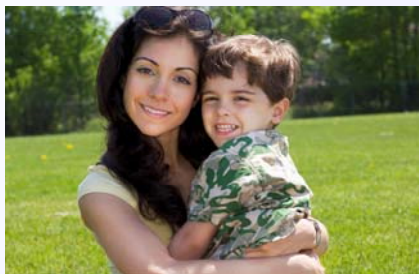
If your concern is not safety related, you should still discuss it with the caseworker or your direct contact, if you are a resource parent through a provider. Because of the non-emergency/non-safety nature of your concern, there is likely to be time to thoughtfully and thoroughly consider it. Think about how your concern ties directly to the care and well-being of the child. Also consider solutions you might be able to offer which would resolve your concern while supporting the child’s need to be connected with their parent.

While permanency may take time to develop, connections with family will always have importance for any child’s long term emotional well-being. Visitation with a parent remains important whether reunification emerges as the final outcome or not. Resource parents who can prioritize maintaining connections for the child, through visitation and other forms of contact, will help to stabilize the child’s emotional well-being so that they can adjust to any permanent outcome, whatever shape that takes. High quality, frequent and meaningful visitation can lead to successful reunification with a parent, however, it can also help a parent accept their obstacles and agree to another permanency option.

Either way, high quality, frequent and meaningful visitation can help ensure that every child grows up in a safe, nurturing and permanent home!

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
- They want to protect their child from the pain of having to say “good-bye” after each visit
- They do not have consistent transportation
- They struggle with guilt over the circumstances of placement
- They have an inconsistent work schedule
- They feel inadequate that the resource family is doing a better job with their child
- They are experiencing depression, anxiety or other mental health needs that interfere with their functioning

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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 or to build a strong relationship if one doesn't exist.



Let us begin by thanking you for opening your heart and home to the children in your care. Whether you are a relative or a non-relative caregiver, you are an important part of the team and your input is valued! Please take time to familiarize yourself with this booklet and discuss questions you have with the appropriate person.

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.

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

- Attending doctor appointments together
- Attending school meetings and extracurricular activities together
- Inviting parents to birthday parties and holiday celebrations
- Facilitating approved phone calls and computer usage (i.e. FaceTime or Skype)
- 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 in 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 to 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" meeting or Family Group Decision Making Conference.

After the visit, talk to the child about how they are feeling. It is very possible that the child will be sad or angry about 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 they will next 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.

How will I be involved in the actual visit?

Frequent, meaningful 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 extremely important partners 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.



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 educational, 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 be a diligent focus from the day a child is removed until permanency is achieved. 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 a 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

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



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, after a child is removed, should be scheduled as soon as possible, but no later than 3 days.



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 input from extended family and kin and support from 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 visits
- Frequency and duration of visits
- Developmental needs of the child
- Location of visits
- Transportation needs
- Participants during the visits
- Any supportive services needed before, during or after the visits

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

- 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:

- Making sure the child knows when the visits will happen, where they will be held and which family members will attend
- Making all possible efforts to adjust your schedule so you can take the child to the visit
- Talking 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 communicating these things with the parent, caseworker or visitation provider
- Establishing 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-playing who will be at the visit
- Encouraging the child to take one of their favorite toys or stuffed animals for comfort

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
- Anger

Some emotions or behaviors you may see **during** a visit include (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



Development of the visitation plan is extremely important and, as a resource parent, you need to participate as a team member. Team members should try to strengthen and build families. Team members include extended family and kin, the county caseworker, service providers, 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 visitation plan is developed it will remain in place until circumstances necessitate changes. Plans could be altered due to changes in work schedules, treatment interventions, changes in the amount of supervision needed 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 caseworker 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 provides important information regarding recommendations for continued visitation.

How do children benefit from frequent and meaningful visitation?

Research has demonstrated that frequent and meaningful visitation positively impacts a child's well-being by:

- Establishing or supporting a parent/child bond
- Assisting with healthy attachment and easing the impact of separation
- Showing the child that their parents care about them
- Showing the child that their siblings are okay



- Calming the fears of children
- Allowing children the opportunity to express anger, fear, and frustration
- Promoting and strengthening positive connections with family
- Supporting the child's psychological development
- Giving the child hope of reunification or an understanding of why reunification is not possible
- Helping the child adjust to placement
- Enhancing a child's emotional well-being
- Reducing the need for psychiatric services and psychotropic medications
- Reducing the possibility of delinquent acts or antisocial behavior
- Increasing positive peer relationships and school performance



Frequent visitation assists parents in the following ways:

- Honors an existing bond and strengthens parent/child attachment
- Helps parents feel more comfortable about the care of their child
- Decreases separation trauma experienced by parents when their child is removed
- Involves parents in their child's everyday life

- Enhances parents motivation to change
- Keeps parents up-to-date with their child's development
- Helps parents acquire new skills and gives them an opportunity in which to practice those skills



Most importantly, frequent visitation between a child and parent is the strongest predictor of successful reunification.

In addition to face-to-face visitation, children should have other types of contact with their parents. This might include a parent attending their child's medical, educational or social events. This may also include approved phone or computer contact, such as Skype or FaceTime.

In addition to their parents, 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 their 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 continue that tradition. A child can also stay connected to their family by phone calls, letters and attendance at various family events.

Children also need to stay connected to their siblings, when safe to do so. In Pennsylvania it is the 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.

Regardless of the type of visitation, communication is key. Children benefit greatly in situations where the resource parent and the biological family have regular contact and positive communication.