

FAMILY VISITATION IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

BRIEF | **JAN 2016**
Washington State

SUMMARY:

Current research shows consistent and frequent visitation between parents and their children in out-of-home care can reduce trauma for children (Smariga, 2007; Mallon & Hess, 2005; Haight, Kagle & Black, 2003). Visitation is crucial to strengthening and maintaining family relationships – it’s also important for parent-child attachments and can decrease the sense of abandonment that children often experience when they are removed from their home and placed into out-of-home care. Family visitation is linked to positive outcomes, including improved child well-being, less time in out-of-home care, and faster reunification when it is in the best interest of the child (Mallon & Hess, 2005; Hess, 2003).

BACKGROUND

On July 1, 2015, there were approximately 8,600 children in out-of-home care in Washington State (Children’s Administration, 2015). Children who are removed from their home due to neglect and/or abuse, and placed in out-of-home care, often experience emotional trauma (Smariga, 2007). Many children are overwhelmed with feelings, such as anger, nervousness, sadness, or fear. Separation anxiety is a common response, especially among younger children who have no ability to understand the reason for separation, and do not have the coping skills to deal with long periods of uncertainty (Barth, Crea et al., 2005; Smariga, 2007). As a result, children can feel hurt or rejected; and may believe their parents do not want to see them anymore.

In the past, Washington State had no consistent policy or guidance on family visitation. In 2003, the state passed a bill to maintain sibling relationships for dependent children (ESSB 5779). A year later, another bill passed relating to family visitation for dependent children, requiring the Children’s Administration to develop and implement consistent statewide policies and protocols based on current best practices (SB 6643). The new law established visitation as the right of the family. When the child is removed from the home, visitation should occur soon after. Maximum parent-child contact is encouraged and determined to be in the best interest of the child – for their health, safety and overall well-being. Visitation cannot be limited as a sanction for a parent’s failure to comply with court orders.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Faster Reunification and Shorter Stays in Out-of-Home Care. Research shows that consistent and frequent family visitation is a best practice for families in dependency cases (Hess, 2003; Mallon & Hess, 2005). Contact between a child and

his/her biological family is the single most important factor related to whether the child remains in out-of-home care. Visitation is strongly associated with shorter placement time and faster family reunification. During visitation, the parent-child attachment is strengthened. This helps prepare families for the transition from out-of-home care to returning home, and increases the likelihood of lasting reunification.

Research also shows a positive correlation between parent-child visitation and children’s well-being while in placement care (Hess, 2003; Mallon & Hess, 2005). Children who frequently visit with their parents are more likely to have higher well-being ratings and adjust well to placement than children who visit less frequently or never visit. In addition, children who have frequent contact with their parents have lower levels of depression and “acting out” behavior (McWey, Acock, & Porter, 2010).

Impact on Children 0-5 years old. There is evidence that the parent-child relationship plays a critical role in early childhood development (Haight, Kagle & Black, 2003; Smariga, 2007). Biological and developmental research finds that when there is a significant absence of contact with the primary caregiver, children under five years will have impaired brain formation and development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012). These early relationships are the basis of a strong neurological foundation necessary for the brain to form. The interactions and sensory cues infants receive from a parent or guardian, such as facial expressions, touching, talking or other sounds, build a healthy brain structure. If this is missing, cognitive delays can occur, impacting academic performance, behavior and mental health later in life.

Frequency and Duration of Visitation is Important. There are many best practices established for parent-child visitation. Two key areas that are very straightforward

include the frequency and duration of these visits when the goal is to reunify children with their parents. According to a few best practice guides that are based on research, there are different frequency and duration goals for different age groups, including:

- Birth – 5 years old, at least 1 hour a day, 5 days a week (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012).
- School-aged, at least 1 hour a day, 2-3 days a week (Visitation/Access Guide, 2005).
- Teenage, 30 minutes - 1 hour a day, weekly (Visitation/Access Guide, 2005).

Enhancing Visitation in Washington State. It is common for parents involved in the child welfare system to attend a parent education program (Barth et al., 2005). The purpose of most programs is to improve parenting knowledge and skills, increase child safety, and ultimately reduce the risk of child maltreatment in the future. Unfortunately, there are few parenting programs that were developed specifically to meet the needs of parents and families in the child welfare system. One area where parenting skills could be increased, but where few efforts are not being made now, is during visitation. Research shows that effective visitation is more than just having one-on-one contact with your child – using these visits to build parental skills is important (Hagt, Sokolec, Budde, & Poertner, 2001). Research suggests that pairing visitation with a parenting program is an effective way to increase reunification (Barth, Landsverk et al., 2005).

To address this need, Partners for Our Children is working closely with Children’s Administration to develop the *Strive* Supervised Visitation program (Partners for Our Children, 2014). The goal of *Strive* is to engage parents in the visitation process, assist parents in preparing for high quality visits with their children, and promote child safety. *Strive* uses a strengths-based, trauma-informed approach to help parents create a positive environment for nurturing their relationship with their child or children within the context of supervised visitation. A "Visit Navigator" is present during the visit, and then debriefs with the parent following the child’s departure. Navigators engage in assessment and monitoring throughout the visit and provide a report to the Children’s Administration after each visit.

To date, 15 sessions have been developed. An initial pre-test of the program, conducted with six parents with children in out-of-home care, was just completed. Revisions are being made to the program based on data collected from parents, Visit Navigators, and child welfare caseworkers and contractors, and the first pilot test of the program will be launched soon. During the pre-test, it was identified that the first five sessions of the *Strive* Supervised Visitation Program provided essential information and support to parents, and appeared to be promising as an initial engagement strategy for parents. The first pilot will compare parent engagement outcomes for 25 parents who participate in first five sessions of the *Strive* program versus 25 parents who participate in services-as-usual supervised visitation.

2015 BUDGET PROVISIO AND STAKEHOLDER INPUT

The 2015 budget passed by the legislature included the following language related to the current visitation policies and practices:

The Children's Administration (CA) shall adopt policies to reduce the percentage of parents requiring supervised visitation, including clarification of the threshold for transition from supervised to unsupervised visitation prior to reunification. The Children's Administration shall submit the revised visitation policy to the appropriate policy and fiscal committees of the legislature by December 1, 2015.

In the early fall of 2015, CA brought a group of individuals together to help inform the process of developing new policies and practices. The group consisted of front line staff, supervisors, and program managers from CA, as well as parent allies, attorneys, WA State CASA, and other advocates/stakeholders. A number of recommendations were made, including starting with the assumption that visits would be unsupervised and thus it would be required that a case be made to have supervised or monitored visits; incorporate parent coaching (when appropriate) by a trained individual into supervised visits; make it clear to caregivers and others why visits are so important; and developing strategies to increase factors that might lead to better quality visits, such as enhancing communication between parent(s) and caregivers. The visitation report has been submitted to the legislature, and while a number of changes are being made to the policy manual, the inclusion of "parent coaching" is not being addressed. It appears, however, that changes related to parent coaching will be made in the social worker guide.

OTHER RELATED WORK: VISITATION AND THE SPOKANE AREA NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR - THE FAMILY IMPACT NETWORK (FIN)

The initial focus of FIN has been supervised visitation. FIN is contracting directly with visitation providers and monitoring wait times and other data elements through a newly designed software-based platform called "Oliver". As a result, the Network Administrator is able to compare various visitation related metrics among the contractors and easily provide such information in a timely fashion to caseworkers and others at CA. With this information, workers can make more informed decisions about which providers to use in order to best serve children and families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since parent child visitation is such a critical component of successful reunification or achieving another permanent plan, Partners for Our Children recommends:

- Assume that parent-child visits will be unsupervised unless there are compelling reasons (such as safety concerns) to recommend supervised or monitored; and develop evidence-based protocols and guidelines for moving from supervised to unsupervised visits.
- Include parent coaching and other parenting enhancement supports during supervised visits whenever appropriate and possible
- Continue to advocate for including visitation as part of the foster care forecast when developing the state budget each year.

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