



Practice Guidelines

Parenting Time (Visitation) - Part I

Preparations for Success

Version Date 5/5/2016

DCS Specialists are the key to parent attendance.

Parents are more likely to attend visits when their caseworkers:

- initiate contact and encourage the parents to attend;
- arrange a set schedule of visits in a natural setting;
- consider the parents' work and service schedule;
- do not set extra requirements, such as that the parent call to request visits, unless the parent has frequently missed visits without cancelling;
- discuss and resolve barriers to attendance, such as scheduling conflicts, transportation, visit location, and feelings of awkwardness.

Never use parenting time as a reward or punishment.

Parents and children have a right to visit, unless it is unsafe. Children need to know that love and relationships are not conditional based on behavior. Don't require negative drug tests, treatment compliance or completion, or a child behavior "level" as conditions for visits.

Parenting time maintains the connections of children with their parents and siblings; increases the likelihood of reunification; and improves child well-being.

- Attachments to parents and siblings aid in the child's development of a sense of self and belonging.
- Having multiple healthy attachments builds resiliency, which is the key to surviving trauma.
- Visits help children know that their parents have not abandoned them.
- Visits reassure children that their parents and siblings are okay; and reassure parents that their children are okay.
- Parenting time often motivates parents to work diligently toward reunification, which reduces length of stay in foster care.
- Visits are opportunities to work through issues of loss, and decrease worries, fantasies, and the child's self-blame.

Parenting time is an opportunity to improve relationships and to assess, learn, practice, and demonstrate parenting skills.

- Visits support a smoother transition when children can safely reunify.
- Without visits, parents and children can become emotionally detached, making successful reunification more difficult.
- Children develop more realistic experiences of what it would be like to live with their parents, and have time to work through concerns.
- Visits can reassure children that it is safe to be with their parents and that their parents will keep them safe from others.
- Without visits, children can develop frightening or idealized fantasies about family members, blame the agency for separating them from their family, feel abandoned, and be unable/unwilling to attach to an adoptive family because they fantasize about being with their parents.

Parents and children feel many emotions before, during, and after parenting time.

- It is normal for children to react and grieve before, during, and after visits. They may be tearful, moody, irritable, or aggressive. Visits are especially stressful for young children. To reduce stress for young children, ask caregivers to transport and remain at part of the visit, and encourage parents' awareness and acceptance of their child's emotions.
- Young children express emotions through behavior. Observe parent-child interaction to assess if the child feels safe and ready to visit.
- Children who do not receive visits also experience grief and loss, and may worry about their parents and siblings.
- Parents often feel pain, anger, guilt, anxiety, stress, and humiliation about the loss of their child. They worry about what their children are feeling and experiencing.
- Parents may feel awkward, intimidated, and worried about how their actions are being evaluated by someone they don't know.
- Children and parents have experienced trauma. Disengaged or intensely emotional behavior around or during visits may be a trauma symptom.

When in-person contact is not possible, consider other types of contact.

Connections between a child and his/her father and mother can be supported through telephone calls, letters, email or text messages, videotapes, audio recordings, pictures, webcasts, attendance at religious events, participation in family or cultural activities, and any creative method to maintain the connection. Consider some of these methods when a parent lives out of state or is incarcerated far from the child.

Hold parenting time around natural parent-child events.

Parenting time should include natural parent-child interactions such as eating and playing together; attending religious or cultural activities; or attending school, medical, or after-school events. During these normal daily activities, bonding occurs and parents pass on culture and values. Keeping the parents familiar and involved with the child's normal activities can also ease reunification transitions, and is less disruptive to the child's routine.

You can ease the emotions and concerns experienced by parents and children participating in parenting time.

- Hold the first parenting time as soon as safely possible after removal. Emotions may become more intense the longer the child and parents wait to see each other.
- Consider allowing a monitored phone call in the first days of placement if the first parenting time cannot happen within 48 hours.
- Prepare the child, parents, and out-of-home caregivers by discussing what to expect during parenting time – where the visit will occur, how long it will last, who will attend, planned activities, and the rules and guidelines for the parents and child.
- Help parents think of activities, and coach them on how to answer difficult questions their child might ask.
- Remind caregivers that it is normal for children to act-out before and after parenting time. Make sure caregivers are provided support.
- Anticipate that parents and children will need to express their emotions before, during, and after visits. Provide them the time, space and guidance to express their emotions appropriately.
- If a child is often upset around parenting time, change one element at a time (location, duration, activity) to find an arrangement that works.
- Have the parent say goodbye at the end of the visit and talk to the child about the next time they will see each other.
- Children like routine. Set up routines for visits, including visit end, such as tidying up and having the parent walk the child to the car.

There are five considerations when developing a planned, purposeful, and progressive parenting time plan.

1. **Types of maltreatment** – Consider the specific safety threats that led to removal, the parent's capacity to attend to the child's needs during visits, and the child's readiness to engage and feel safe with the parent. Identify the level of supervision necessary to control threats and help the child feel secure during parenting time. Plan activities to help parents learn, practice, and demonstrate the skills needed for reunification to occur.
2. **Child development and parenting skills** – Have the parents choose activities and locations that fit the child's developmental stage; plan activities that parents and children of a certain age normally do together.
3. **Time in care** –
 - Initial visits are to maintain connections, assure family members that everyone is okay, and complete an initial assessment.
 - After the initial phase, use visits to teach and practice parenting skills related to the reasons for removal. When nearing a final permanency decision, visits assess whether parents can maintain improved skills without supervision during stressful times.
 - In the reunification phase, more frequent and less supervised visits smooth the transition home, and help to identify services needed to support the family following reunification.
 - Post-adoption/guardianship visits can maintain important connections with siblings, relatives, parents, etc.
4. **The family's cultural background** – Have the parents share family culture through religion, food, stories, songs, etc.
5. **Possible safety or well-being factors** – Consult with experts to consider issues of substance abuse, domestic violence, child or parent special needs, and mental illness that could affect child safety or reactions to visits.



Practice Guidelines

Parenting Time (Visitation) - Part II

Progressive Visitation Planning

Hold parenting time in natural locations.

Hold parenting time where the child is most comfortable. Consider whether visits can safely happen in a parent's or relative's home, or a school or community location. When visiting in a calm, quiet and comfortable location, children are less stressed and parents are more likely to show up. Visits at the home give children a greater sense of normalcy, allow them to visit their pets, and aid assessment of the relationship and home environment.

Unsupervised visitation often starts early, well before reunification.

The decision of whether a child will be safe in the full-time care of a parent is different than the decision of whether a child can be alone with a parent for a time-limited visit with boundaries. Determine when, where, and with whom the safety threats are present or not present. Unsupervised visits can happen safely at times or locations where the threats are not present.

A well-developed parenting time plan includes nine elements: Purpose, frequency, length, location, attendees, activities, supervision, responsibilities (rules, boundaries, who does what), what to have at the visits.

- Discuss all elements of the plan with the parents, caregivers, child, and people responsible for transportation or supervision.
- Review and revise the plan during TDM, CFT, or case plan staffing meetings. Ask the parent what is/isn't working.
- Visitation will run most smoothly when you get input from each party and make sure all elements of the plan are clear.
- It is especially important to discuss the purposes of visitation with the parents (maintain attachments, learn/demonstrate parenting skills).
- Hold visits at the agency office only if needed to keep the child safe.
- In most cases, encourage parents to show their love and affection.
- Have the parents plan normal parenting activities that the family does successfully.
- Incorporate parenting activities related to the maltreatment slowly, allowing time to learn and safely practice.
- Specific boundaries or rules should be provided to the parent and others in writing and included in the visitation plan.
- Encourage children to bring a comfort item to the visit.

Consider the age and developmental level of the child when setting the frequency and length of parenting time.

Children age birth through five need more frequent contact of short duration to develop and maintain attachments because their capacity for long-term memory is not fully developed. Schedule visits to maintain the child's sleep and feeding schedule. Children who are potty training will need assistance during travel. When possible, avoid disruption of the child's routine and long periods of travel by having the parent travel to the child.

Children ages 6 and up are able to have visitation once or twice a week and still feel a secure attachment with their parent(s). Schedule visits so the child does not miss school or extracurricular activities that support the child's social development and sense of normalcy. Teens may have a job or want to spend time with their friends. Supplemental visitation can be provided through phone or e-mail so the parents remain a part of the child's daily life.

Increase the length and frequency of parenting time when the parent has demonstrated the ability to respond appropriately to the child's needs.

When 6-8 hour unsupervised parenting time has been successful, consider overnight visits in the home. The first overnight visits may need to be monitored by a relative or other person. In general, if the child is safe at home for lengthy visits and frequent overnights, the child should move home with close follow-up and in-home support. No child should return home to a parent unless there have been multiple successful unsupervised overnight visits in the home, that include all people who will be living with the child.

Change visit frequency and supervision based on parent behavior and demonstrated capabilities.

Increase parenting time based on the parent's demonstrated ability to meet the child's needs, not service compliance or completion.

Treatment services can help parents change their behavior and learn new skills, but parents can also improve the behavior and skills without attending treatment services. On the other hand, sometimes a parent completes a service but does not change his/her behavior. As parent capacities increase, provide progressive opportunities for parents to demonstrate their capabilities, even when they are not attending or have not completed treatment services.

More information on visitation supervision and activities is available.

The DCS Policy and Procedures Manual includes a Visitation Supervision Continuum document and other resources in Chapter 3, Section 9, Related Information.

Selecting the right level of supervision ensures child safety and allows the most normal family interactions possible.

- Highly Structured/Supervised: The child is always in sight or hearing of the person supervising the visitation and this person must be proficient in the family's language. The supervisor escorts the child to the bathroom, drinking fountain, etc.
- Moderate Supervision: An objective party maintains some level of contact during the visit to ensure the visit plan is followed. The level of observation will vary depending on the plan. In the lowest level, the visit can occur in a public setting without a designated observer: school events, children's sports or other activities, medical appointments, parks, restaurants, etc.
- Intermittent or Unsupervised: Parents and children are allowed time alone from 1 hour to overnight. Children and family have resources available during the visit to call for help. A clear visitation plan with safety actions has been developed and is known by all parties.

In some cases, face-to-face contact may not be possible because the child would be unsafe. If it is not safe for a parent and child to have face-to-face visits, consider whether monitored telephone conversations, letters, email, or text messaging can allow the parent and child to safely maintain a connection.

Progressive parenting time safely moves from highly supervised short visits to unsupervised overnight visits.

The progressive method gives everyone more confidence that unsafe behaviors will not occur, even under stressful situations and/or when the visits are not supervised. The progressive method follows these steps:

- Always start as supervised with restrictions on location, activities, and other elements of visits. In some cases, you will only need one or a few supervised visits with tight restrictions.
- When the parent-child interactions are successful, change ONE element at a time (lengthen the parenting time or change the location).
- One change at a time allows for accurate assessment of success or failure while taking minimal risk that the child might be harmed.
- The goal is to slowly increase the parents' responsibilities and move toward unsupervised visits in the parents' home, while safely testing and assessing the parents' abilities.
- Near the end of the process, visits will include testing parenting skills under stressful situations that would be likely to trigger recurrence of abuse if the parents' skills and behavior have not changed.
- When making a change, if failures or repeated problems occur go back to the last visit plan that was working. Once stable, change a different element to determine if progress can be made.
- When an issue is identified that is preventing progress, address that issue during visits with a teaching supervisor and/or through treatment services for the parent or child.
- When a parent's skills do not progress, assess the treatment plan to be sure the parent is receiving the right services.
- Eventually, the family will either have successful unsupervised visits in their home, or progress will have stopped at a lower level. The success of parenting time will inform the final permanency decision.