

HANDOUT 1: PREPARING FOR AND MANAGING VISITATION

Increasing Your Comfort When Facilitating Visits

Children in foster care need to be supported by having ongoing connection with their families. These connections are not only critical for reunification (number one goal for children in the child welfare system) but help children with their overall well-being. The more comfortable and accepting parents who are fostering are in these visits, the more positive the visits will be for the children in your home.

Why Visitation Anyway?

Recent practice and research shows that maintaining regular contact between children and their families benefits everyone. Even though these visits may not always be easy, they are critical...especially for the children. Listed below are some of the advantages:

- Feelings of grief and loss that children feel upon separating are minimized. Children can see their family is okay and still loves them—this can help children relax and increase their feelings of safety.
- Allows children to remain physically and emotionally connected to their families.
- Helps children form a healthy self-identity and to get answers to questions about their past.
- If children return home, the visitation can help make this transition go smoother.
- The child's parents can be reassured that their child is in a nurturing and stable home.
- Parents who are fostering can model effective parenting skills and strategies for the child's parents.
- Parents who are fostering or adopting can ask about the child's schedules, fears, allergies, sleep habits, likes, and dislikes. They can also learn culturally-specific child care strategies from family members, which can enhance a child's cultural identity.
- Parents can view the family that is fostering or adopting as a resource rather than a threat.
- If the child returns home, the relationship that was developed might result in on-going contact.

Creating and Respecting Boundaries

Establishing and maintaining a healthy, working relationship with the child's family requires creating and respecting boundaries. The boundaries should be discussed with the caseworker and will vary greatly based on the individual needs of the child and the situation that resulted in the child being taken into care. It is critical that parents who are fostering have some understanding and empathy for the child's family.

As in all healthy relationships, effective and clear communication is crucial and necessary. Communicate what your boundaries are to all other members of the foster team. Let them know what makes you feel uncomfortable and what you find acceptable. For example, what name would you prefer to be addressed by? What is your preferred method of communication with the child's family (i.e. a call, text, email, etc.)? These are all important boundaries that should be established as early as possible.

Caseworkers can help parents who are fostering determine and establish boundaries around things such as phone calls, visits to the home, sharing of goods, support structure, and communication.

In order to maintain a relationship by respecting boundaries, it is important to frequently reassess the situation. Every so often, get together with the other members of the team to talk things out. You'll find that your boundaries and the boundaries of others can change and progress. The previously decided on boundaries will need to be re-evaluated to make sure every person on the team is comfortable with moving forward.

Here are the basic steps to establishing and maintaining boundaries in a healthy relationship. These even extend outside the realm of fostering and can be applied to all relationships:

- Determine your own boundaries; they should not be too rigid or undefined – remember to empathize and imagine yourself in the other's situations.
- Vocalize your boundaries and stick to them – remain consistent.
- Listen, understand, and respect the other person's boundaries.
- Come to a common understanding and agreement after your discussion of boundaries.
- Commit to live within those relationship boundaries.
- Re-evaluate those boundaries periodically – hopefully over time you all will feel more comfortable with being closely connected.

Strategies to Support a Great Visit

There are many strategies you can use to enhance the visitation experience. Listed below are some strategies that may be helpful. Of course it is important to note that visitations vary and it is important for parents who are fostering to discuss visitations with the caseworker and ensure that they are adhering to agency/court rules regarding the visitations.

- Remember school papers and take them to visits so that the child can show their parents.
- Talk to the family about the child. Ask about fears, allergies, and how they usually do in school. What a great way to empower the family and acknowledge that they are the expert on their child! Even if you don't agree with their assessment, the act of asking may mean a lot to some parents.
- Bring items to visits that celebrate and mark the child's growth and development. This may include artwork, school pictures, and other craft items.
- If viable, invite parents to attend different meetings and appointments with you. Remember parent teacher meetings and doctor appointments can be great mentoring opportunities.
- Work on child development milestones with the parents. This may include potty training, first steps, or even working on math facts with older children.
- Positive parenting techniques can be gained when the parents watch how you interact with the child. Make it safe and comfortable for a parent to ask about how they handle an argument or other incident with their child. Share thoughts about how to best handle such events. This can assure parents that you are both on the same team – the child's team.
- Pack a meal or snack for a visit so that the child can share a meal with their family.
- Keep a journal related to the child's progress, activities, school events, milestones and share them with the child's family.
- If viable, have some of the visitations take place in the foster parent's home so that the parent can participate in daily activities such as bathing, feeding, reading stories, or tucking into bed.
- Bring games or books the child likes to the visitation.

Reflecting

Finally, spend some time reflecting on how you typically think about and interact with the child's family. Start now with a promise to yourself that you are not going to say negative things about the child's family, especially in front of the child. Your view of the child's family and your ability to accept them as they are will translate into increased comfort and better outcomes for everyone.

Adapted from North American Council on Adoptable Children's *Adoptalk* article by Phyllis Stevens.