



CASA Visitation Observation Notes & Questions

Benefits of Visitation

Visiting between parents and their children is an essential component of work with children in foster care and their families. It is also a right and a responsibility retained by parents. It has been demonstrated that children who have frequent, meaningful visits with their parents are more likely to return home.

Conditions supporting frequent and meaningful visitation include:

- **Visits maintain and improve the parent-child relationship which facilitates return home.** Visits enable children to see their parents realistically and rationally and can help to calm separation fears. Visits show children that they are loved despite the physical separation. Visiting is the principal and often only means of maintaining, improving, or developing the child's relationship with his/her parents.
- **Visits provide the opportunity for parents to improve their parenting skills and to demonstrate their ability to care for their child.**
- **Visits provide the social worker the opportunity to observe and to evaluate the strengths and the weaknesses of the parent-child relationship.** The social worker can determine whether behavior is appropriate or inappropriate. Information about the level of commitment of the parent can be gathered. The reaction of the child can be observed. Such information can assist the agency in making decisions regarding the most appropriate permanent plan.
- **Visits provide a good indicator of the possibility of reunification and they provide the court and other agencies with documentation of the parent's progress.**
- **Visits can be a motivator for parents who are making progress on the objectives of their Out of Home Family Services Agreement.** When social workers observe parents making progress, they can ask the Court to review the visitation plan and revise it to allow more frequent visits, longer visits, or unsupervised visits, as appropriate.

Restriction of Visitation

The physical separation that is created by foster care placements does not eliminate the attachment between the parent and the child. Separations will have a marked effect on both the child and the parents. The emotions created by separation and the grieving that results may be difficult and will be intensified during and after visits. As a result, parental behavior during visits may be unpredictable and disturbed and may have damaging effects on the child. When problems and negative reactions occur, they should be handled first by clarifying why the problems are occurring and what can be done about them. If this does not lessen the problems, limiting different aspects of the Visitation Plan should be tried before consideration is given to terminating visits completely.

Before visits can be sharply limited or terminated, the agency should:

- Identify specific parental behaviors which are upsetting to the child
- Demonstrate that the child's difficulties are not a child's normal anxiety response to parent-child visits, and that they have destructive effects
- Demonstrate that reasonable efforts have been made to explain to parents the implications of not working to improve visiting
- **Think about school and day care.** Most children would welcome lunch with their parents and most schools not only allow it but encourage this. Day care providers may also cooperate with encouragement. The parent can learn about this most important aspect of their child's life, and meet the teacher or day care provider.
- **Include the parents at the doctor or dentist appointments.** This provides the parent with the opportunity to take the responsibility for medical concerns when possible and keeps the parent informed. It can also reassure the child who may be fearful.
- **Take the visits outside the agency.** Parks, playgrounds, fast-food restaurants, and other places allow for visits that more closely resemble normal parent child interaction.
- **Recruit volunteers and make them visitation specialists.** Transportation and the need for supervision should not limit the opportunity for visits. Volunteers may also become role models and mentors.

Social Workers should observe and document the following during visits:

- Who participated?
- How long did the visit last?
- How did the parents greet the child?
- What was the child's response?
- What was the interaction between parents and child?
- What activities took place? How was the time spent?
- Did the parents set limits and/or discipline the child?
- Did the parents pay attention to the child's needs?
- Did the parents and child display affection?
- How did the child behave?
- Was the social worker required to intervene?
- How did the parents and child separate?
- What happened after the visit?