
Aspiranet

~ February 2020 ~

Monthly Training Topic

Birth Family Visits

For children in foster care, visits with their family are invaluable for maintaining their connections and relationships, and also offer an opportunity to help children cope with the trauma of being separated from their family.

Studies show that children in foster care who have regular, frequent contact with their family generally experience shorter stays in care, have more successful reunification, are less likely to re-enter foster care, and overall have improved emotional well being.

In your role as a foster parent, you have the unique opportunity to help children to further develop and maintain these important family connections, whether or not the children will be reunifying with their family.

And for children who do have a plan for reunification, family visits help to prepare the family and children for the transition back to their family's care.

Family visits not only promote a child's family connections and transition, but also reinforce their sense of community, family history and culture, which are important for a child's sense of continuity, stability and well being.

Foster parents also have the opportunity to assist children to cope with the variety of feelings and reactions children experience when having visits with their family. It is important to remember that it is normal for children to react to the grief and loss they experience in being separated from their family. For the children, seeing their family can remind them of their loss. As a result, foster parents may see children experience these reactions before, during and after family visits.

You may notice changes in mood, from happiness and excitement to sadness, anger, acting out, withdrawing or crying. Children may have big expectations for the visits, while also feeling uncertain about seeing their family, or may experience disappointment if a visit does not go as planned or expected. Some children may experience anxiety before or after visits, and have difficulty sleeping, concentrating or may show signs of restlessness. It is also not uncommon for some children to regress and behave or have needs of an earlier developmental stage.

It can be a natural response to want to protect children in your care from painful reactions and perhaps come to the conclusion that the visits are too difficult and / or disruptive for the child. However, changes in a child's behavior before or after a family visit does not necessarily mean the visits are harmful or hurting the child. As mentioned, the reactions are often a normal response to the loss they feel. In fact, behavioral or emotional reactions can be due to their attachment with their parent and be the resulting upset in having to leave their parent again.

How can Foster Parents Help Children Before & After Visits?

Preparing for Visits

Let your child know what to expect: Together with your Aspiranet Social Worker discuss what the child can expect for visits, including with who they will visit, how often visits are scheduled, the location and length of visits, and if visits are supervised, who will be providing the supervision.

Talk with your child: Validate your child's feelings about being separated from their family, and if ready, help your child to talk about their feelings. If they are not wanting or ready to talk, let them know you are available to talk and reassure them that having mixed feelings is normal, such as feeling both excited and anxious about seeing their family. Perhaps help them to think of an activity they may want to do during the visit, such as playing cards or a board game.

Be Consistent with Visitation Schedule: In order to accommodate a child's visits with their family, it may require that your own schedule needs some adjusting. While this is not always convenient, it is important to maintain the consistent visitation schedule and to understand that it is often set by child's Placement Worker and/or court and therefore cannot be changed without approval. In addition, it is important to remember that a child's visits with family cannot be used as a form of reward or discipline and visits must occur as scheduled.

Develop a Before-Visit Routine: A simple routine before each visit can be assuring to a child. Maybe the child wants to lay out their clothes ahead of time, or gather things to bring to the visit. Even a short verbal game in the car on the way to / from each visit can be helpful.

Provide Transportation to Visit: In addition to this being a foster parent responsibility, it is also an opportunity to provide some transition and preparation for the visit. It can be helpful to have a consistent 'good bye'; routine with your foster child, such as a high five, or a saying such as 'see you in a while crocodile' as a signal that you will be returning to pick them up.

It is also important to be on time for dropping off and picking up your foster child. This is not only respectful of the family's time together; it also provides the child with reassurance of expectations and reinforcement of boundaries.

Transition Following Visits

- It is important to recognize that children might need some time to be alone after a visit.
- Let them know you are willing to listen if and when they want to talk about the visit, their feelings, etc.

- Once children have had some alone time, it can be helpful to develop a simple routine around spending some time together, such as playing a game, watching a movie, taking a bike ride, etc. in order to help your child to transition back with your family and home.
- Watch for cues from your child, and if your child seems open to talking, ask about how the visit went, let the child share how they feel about the visits, their family, etc.
- Acknowledge you understand that it can be difficult to visit their parents for a while and then have to leave them again. Keep your comments about their parents and the visits respectful and as positive as possible.

When a Visit is Canceled or Parent Does Not Attend

A canceled or missed visit can be very disappointing and hurtful for a child. The following are suggestions for supporting your child:

- If the visit is canceled or missed, if known, provide a simple explanation as to why and avoid any blame. For example, the parent(s) schedule changed, or the social worker had to re-schedule the visit.
- Provide your child with assurance that she or he is not the reason the visit was canceled, and that they did not do anything wrong.
- Give additional comfort and validate your child's feelings of disappointment, sadness, anger, etc.
- If an activity was chosen for the family visit, suggest doing the activity together or find another activity that provides an opportunity for a little additional time and attention.

Support from your Aspiranet Social Worker

Your Aspiranet Social Worker is available to you for support, consultation, and intervention regarding the children's reactions and behavior around family visits. Please share your observations and any concerns. Please be sure to contact your Aspiranet Social Worker if your child seems especially distressed before or after visits and immediately report to Aspiranet any safety or child abuse concerns regarding family visits.

It can be helpful for you, as the foster parent, to have some time to "debrief" with your Aspiranet Social Worker and share your own feelings and reactions. It may be helpful to also remember that the visits and separation are often difficult and painful for the child's family as well, and they also benefit from support and empathy.

For more information regarding Aspiranet procedures for Birth Family Visits, please see the Aspiranet Foster Parent Manual pages PRO 1 – 3.

Please sign and return this page to your Aspiranet Social Worker for training credit.
My signature below indicates that I have completed the February 2020 "Birth Family Visitation" training.

Signature Foster Parent #1

Date

Print Name Foster Parent #1

Signature Foster Parent #2

Date

Print Name Foster Parent #2

Aspiranet Authorized Signature

Date

Training credit: ____ minutes