Contents

Case Study: The Johnson Family .................................................. 1

Changes in Children’s Behavior Before and After Parent Visits........ 2
Reprinted from the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development

A Time to Bond: Making the Most of Your Visits ....................... 4
Reprinted from Rise, a magazine by and for parents affected by the child welfare system

References .................................................................................... 6

Webinar Slides .............................................................................. 7
Case Study: The Johnson Family

**Mother:** Tina Johnson (34 years old)

**Child:** Sydney (10 years old)

Sydney Johnson has been in custody for nine months following an adjudication of neglect by the court. Ms. Johnson neglected her child during her involvement in illegal drug use. Her drugs of choice were methamphetamine and alcohol. On numerous occasions the child was left alone over night and once for an entire weekend. She was taken into custody following police involvement where she was found begging for food one Saturday afternoon.

You are the new worker for the case, which was recently reassigned when her previous worker left the agency. You have been working with the family for the past month, but have had limited success in breaking the ice with Ms. Johnson. She attends the visits, but has little to say and does not seem to want any interaction with you. Ms. Johnson also attended most but not all of her parenting classes, where she participated minimally. She has just recently begun participating in a treatment program for her addiction, after sporadic attendance for the last several months. So while she is following through on specific parts of her case plan, you see little evidence of a change in her parenting style or insight into her situation.

During the last several visits you have noticed that mom provides very little structure or guidance during the visit. In fact, she leaves most of the discipline to you and chooses not to intervene when Sydney acts out. Sydney’s foster parents report that after visits, Sydney comes home very agitated and is easily “set off.” The foster parents have requested a reduction in visits because of the effect they have on Sydney, and say they are having a hard time managing Sydney’s “melt downs.” At the end of today’s visit, Sydney cries and begs to come home with her mother. Her mother tells Sydney to stop crying and calm down.

The next visit will take place next in one week at Ms. Johnson’s apartment.
Changes in Children’s Behavior Before and After Parent Visits

Visits between foster children and their biological parents are important. These visits allow children to maintain contact with their birth family. Studies suggest that the more of these visits foster children have, the more positively they view their birth parents and the shorter their stays in foster care are likely to be. These visits also help social workers and juvenile courts gauge how well birth parents are responding to efforts to help them regain custody and what additional steps might be necessary to return the child to the family.

However, these visits can be difficult for foster children, birth parents, and foster parents. Birth parents, for example, may not understand the importance of these visits, and that could affect their willingness to visit and their behavior during visits. Foster parents may not like the birth parents or feel their role is threatened by them. For a number of reasons, children can suffer before, during, and after visits with their birth parents.

Unfortunately, foster parents often are the ones who must cope with the child’s issues and behavior, as well as their own feelings, when these visits do not go well.

Understanding a foster child’s response to birth parent visits
There are no foolproof ways to guarantee that visits between foster children and their birth parents will be successful. But knowing about behaviors you might see in your foster child and taking a few steps to prepare your child and facilitate the visit should help.

Before-visit symptoms
Foster children can be affected by knowing that a visit with their birth parents is approaching. Here are some of the symptoms you might see in your child before the visit:
- Nightmares and sleep disturbances.
- Unrealistic expectations about how the visit will go.
- Anxiety.

After-visit symptoms
Children can experience a variety of feelings after visiting with their birth parents. They also might behave in ways that are difficult to cope with. Feelings and behaviors you might see from your foster child after a visit include:
- Nightmares and sleep disturbances.
- Crying, sometimes excessively.
- Sadness.
- Disappointment.
- Acting out, such as stomping feet, displaying antisocial behavior, and ignoring foster family members.
- Anger.
- Ambivalence.
- Withdrawal.
- Anxiety.

You and Your Foster Child is a publication of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development made possible with help from the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education. Additional topics in the You and Your Foster Child series are available on the Internet at www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/publications/fosterparent. Other helpful publications on parenting, children, youth, and families from the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development are also available online at www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family. You and Your Foster Child may be reproduced for nonprofit use only.
Preparing for the visit
It is important to do what you can to prepare your foster children for a visit with birth parents. Here are some suggestions:
- Make the necessary changes in your family's schedule to accommodate the visit.
- Work with the birth parents to plan and schedule visits.
- Keep your child informed of planned visits.
- Have some special before-visit rituals to comfort the child, such as arranging special clothes or fixing the child's hair in a particular way.
- Be realistic with your foster child about which family members will and will not be at the visit—for example, mom only, mom and dad, grandparents, etc.
- Be open about which nonfamily members will be at the visit. These might include a social worker, other caseworkers, yourself, etc.
- Provide extra emotional support to your child before the visit.
- Make a game out of before-visit time. You might, for example, let your foster children "play social worker" by having them ask questions and play the role.
- Find out what your foster child would like to do at the visit and try to arrange the activity. If his or her idea is not realistic, work with him or her to come up with a more practical plan.
- Talk to your foster children about any items—toys, books, etc.—they would like to take to the visit.

Facilitating visits
You always should try your best to make visits between your foster children and their birth parents go smoothly. Here are a few steps you can take that might help:
- Try to have the visit take place in your home or in the birth parents' home rather than in agency office.
- Volunteer to provide transportation to and from visits.
- Help birth parents by being a model of appropriate parenting behavior.
- Reinforce the birth parents' confidence in their parenting skills when they show positive change.
- Respect the birth parents, and treat them fairly.
- When appropriate or necessary, observe visits.
- Be careful when talking about the birth parents. Try to be positive.
- Always discuss negative actions of the parents during visits in terms of the choices the parents made. Do not use blaming language.

After-visit support
There may be some circumstances that occur that need attention after the visit. Here are some suggestions for handling the period after a visit:
- Talk to your foster child about how the visit went.
- Let the child talk about how he or she feels about the visit and parents.
- Encourage questions about the visit or the foster situation. Answer them as honestly as possible.
- Reassure your foster children about any issues they might be concerned about.
- Ask your child what kinds of activities he or she would like to do at the next visit.
- Explain that you understand it can be difficult to visit parents for a little while and then have to leave them again.
- If possible, let your foster child know when the next visit is scheduled.
- Spend additional time nurturing your foster child and showing extra affection. Do this regardless of how the visit went, but especially when a visit does not go well.
- If your foster child is consistently unhappy or distressed after visits, report this to the social worker.
- Report any suspicion of child abuse immediately.

When a visit is canceled
A canceled visit can be hard on a child. Here are ways to support your foster child when that happens:
- Provide additional comforting when visits are canceled, for whatever reason.
- When telling your foster child about a canceled visit, do not blame. Simply explain that the parent made certain choices, the social worker had to reschedule, etc.
- Assure your foster child that he or she is not the reason the visit was canceled, he or she did not do anything wrong, and he or she is still loved.
- Try to do the activity with the child that was planned with the parents, if possible.
- Spend extra time with your foster child.

When to seek professional help
Changes in a child's behavior after a visit do not necessarily mean the visit hurt the child. The change might, for example, mean the child has a secure attachment with the parent and that he or she is upset about having to leave the parent again. However, if behavior changes are severe or overly disruptive to the foster family, professional help may be necessary, and the situation should be brought to the attention of the child's social worker.
A Time To Bond

Making the most of your visits.

Jacqueline Israel, whose children spent six years in foster care, is a parent advocate at Graham Windham. She helps parents at the agency understand their rights and get the help they need. Here she explains how to make the most of your visits.

1. Bring Toys and Games
When you visit at the agency, the room just isn’t a home environment. I suggest that parents bring games, coloring books, activity books, crayons. Play some soft music, and bring books to read to your child. You can even bring your own visiting blanket so you and your children can sit down on the floor with Legos and blocks.

2. Make Visits a Time to Bond
During the visit, you definitely want to interact. Sometimes I see parents come and they look at the kid, sitting far apart. It’s not like visiting at a hospital. It’s a time to strengthen the bond you have with your child.

Some parents want to do homework with the children, and it’s a good thing to care about your child’s education, but if homework is troublesome and causes tension in your family, I wouldn’t suggest doing that during a visit. When you’re getting frustrated, you’re not building your bond.

Don’t use your visits to complain about the situation, or dump your feelings on your child. That takes quality time away from your child.

3. Don’t Make Promises You Can’t Keep
One of the hardest moments is when children ask, “When am I coming home?” Be as truthful and honest as you can be, while keeping in mind the child’s age. Tell your children, “I wish I could take you home right now, but I can’t. I’m working on it, and I’ll take you home as soon as possible.”

Don’t make promises that you can’t keep. If you say, “You’ll be home next week,” and it doesn’t happen, your child won’t know who to trust, or what is true and what is false.

4. Expect Your Kids to Act Up
It’s normal for a child to feel angry or scared about being in foster care, and to act up as a result. When parents hear that a child is acting up, they start thinking, “Why is this happening? Is someone hurting my child?” They feel powerless.

You might feel very scared if you can’t help your child. You might even start acting out, becoming angry or explosive. But you can help your children by reassuring them that you’re working to get them home, and letting them know that you love them and care about them even when you’re not together.

5. Build a Relationship with the Foster Mom
You can help your child and your case by being polite to the foster parent. At visits, say, “Hello. How are my kids? How are they in school? Can I meet you for open school night?”

To get your children back, you have to be part of your child’s life, and the foster mom can help you with that. It’s good if the foster mom can say in court, “I met the children’s mother at the children’s doctor’s appointment,” or, “For open school night we met and went together to discuss the children’s education.”

When my kids were in care, the court could say to me, “Jacqueline, you were a bad parent for all these things you did in the past.” But I could say, “I have
your children say goodbye, and let them know you’ll see them soon. When it’s almost time to leave, help your child get ready to go. Say, “It’s time for us to go now. Please take care, I’ll see you soon. Ask the foster parent if you can call me.” Say goodbye and leave your child with the foster parent.

I see some parents who stay with their children as long as they can. One parent follows the foster parent’s car. Don’t do that. That’s not a healthy thing for the children to see. If you break the rules, your children get the idea that they can also choose whether to follow rules. That will hurt your children in school and when they come back home.

7. Keep Visiting and It Will Get Easier
Sometimes I hear parents say, “It’s just too hard to visit my child at the agency.” But the agency is not going to say, “Take all the time you need and your child will be there for you when you’re ready.” You need to prove to the agency that you care about your child.

You and your child will feel better if you spend more time together. Even a week apart can feel like an eternity to a child. Because children are having new experiences every day. One month they’re in diapers. Soon they’re saying, “You mean to tell me that light has a speed and water turns into clouds?”

Do your best to bond with your child, and the visits will get easier.
References


The Promise of Visitation

- Maintain parent-child attachment
- Calm children’s separation fears
- Empower birth parents
- Help birth parents face reality
- Allow birth parents to learn and practice new skills and behaviors
- Help us assess and document progress
- Help children and foster parents see the parents realistically

(Hess & Mintun, 1992; Cantos & Gries, 1997)

Agenda

I. Brief Orientation
II. Introductions
III. What We Know about Parent-Child Visits
IV. Strategies for Making Visits Better
V. Q & A

In Birth Parents’ Own Words

Use your chat box...
- What are your reactions to the birth parent quotations?
- What do you find most challenging or frustrating about visits between birth parents and children in foster care?

In Your Own Words

Use the chat box: When was the last time you received training on visitation?
III. WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT PARENT-CHILD VISITS

Birth Parent Fears

*Use your chat box: What might parents have to fear about visits with their children in foster care?*
- Being judged
- Not knowing what to do during visit
- Emotions (theirs or their child’s)
- Reactions to foster parent
- Losing their children forever

How Poorly Implemented Visits Undermine Trust

**Feelings of Fear**
- Lack of Success
- Missed Visits
- Distrust
- Feelings of Frustration and Stress

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS**

1. Parent-Social Worker Visits
   - Parents not visited by their worker are less likely to visit their children
     - Children therefore remain in care longer
   - Influence of social worker attitudes/encouragement

   *Sources: Jones, Neuman, & Shyne, 1976; CASCW, 1997*

2. Frequency Matters

   **Frequent contact between the child and birth family is the single most important factor related to successful reunification and length of stay in care.**

   - **Children in care <20 months:**
     - Twice as many visits as children in care longer
   - **No visits:**
     - 50.73 months in care
   - **4 or more visits:**
     - 19.37 months in care

   *Sources: White, M., Albers, E. & Bitoni, C. 1996; Meich, 1985*

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS**

Other Benefits of Frequent Visits

- Improved behavior in foster home and school
- Decreased anxiety and depression
- Decreased emotional outbursts, tension, and conflict
- Less likely to be referred for psychiatric services
- Less likely to engage in delinquent or anti-social acts such as vandalism, stealing, running away
- Significant gains in verbal and nonverbal IQ
- Perceived as more likeable by teachers / peers

*Sources: White et al., 1996; Cantos & Gries, 1997*
WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

3. Location Matters

- Comfortable
- Child-proof
- Adequate privacy
- Home-like
- Age appropriate activities
- Clean

Research supports having visitation in a variety of natural, family-friendly settings.

IV. STRATEGIES FOR MAKING VISITS BETTER

- A. Frequency
- B. Location
- C. Sibling visits
- D. Pre-teaching
- E. Working with Foster Parents and Children

A. Strategies Related to Frequency

- Infants and young children
  - Frequent and short
  - Multiple visits per week ideal
- Older children
  - Still essential
  - Frequency not as urgent
  - Should be longer

Sources: Weintraub & Hillman, 2005

B. Strategies Related to Location

- Encourage parent to plan visit locations based on their goals for the visit and child’s interests, strengths, and needs
- Also consider case plan goals:
  - Life skills or parenting skills
- As a team, assess safety for all involved
  - Consider and plan for risk factors

C. Strategies Related to Siblings

- Siblings may be primary support for each other
- Reassure older/younger siblings
- Individualized case plan and coaching:
  - Reassuming parental role
  - Managing complicated emotions and behaviors
  - Arranging logistics

Fostering Bonds Between Siblings

- Family-to-family visits and meals
- Play dates
- Sports, activities, etc
  - Phone, Skype, IM, email, etc.
  - Babysitting/respite
  - Camps
  - Unstructured, interactive time together instead of video games or movies.
D. Pre-teaching

- Helping all involved in the visitation process think ahead and practice skills
- Around potentially troublesome situations
  - Appropriate ways to manage children’s behavior
  - Managing the conclusion of visits
  - Answering difficult questions
  - Responding to child’s emotional needs
- Allows parents to demonstrate concrete skills to measure progress.

Steps in Pre-teaching

1. Identify potential issues / situations
2. Think about natural responses
3. Explore the best response
4. Practice, practice, practice
5. Give effective feedback

Source: Gottman 1997

Case Study:
Ms. Johnson and Sydney

- 10 year old Sydney, in custody 9 months
- Ms. Johnson has history of substance abuse (methamphetamine and alcohol)
- Little structure or interaction during visits
- Sydney’s foster parents concerned about meltdowns after visits

1. Identify Potential Issues/Situations

- “What if’s”
- Sticky situations that undermine success

Use your chat box:
What are some other difficult questions or situations that might come up for Ms. Johnson?

2. Think about Natural Responses

- How would they feel?
- What would they think?
- What would they fear?
- How might they react?

In this stage, it is important for people to focus on their natural or typical reactions and not what they feel is the best reaction.

3. Explore the Best Response

- What is the best way to respond?
- The easy answer is not always the best one.
- Again consider parenting skills and risk factors in coaching responses

Exploring and rehearsing responses will better prepare the birth parent to feel successful during visits.
4. Practice, Practice, Practice

- Practice is part of anything we learn
- Help families practice skills so they’re more comfortable making mistakes and asking questions

5. Give Effective Feedback

Two important times
1. After the practice step of pre-teaching
2. After the parent-child visit

a. Relationship is critical
b. Establish ground rules in advance.
c. Share your purpose.
d. Ask the parent how they would like to receive feedback.
e. Consistently check for understanding
f. Start with the positives.
g. Be careful in your choice of words.
h. Give rationales that align with parent’s thinking and goals

Pre-teaching for Children and Out-of-Home Care Providers

*Pre-teaching for foster parent/children*

Handout: Changes in Children’s Behavior
Handout: A Time To Bond

V. QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Transfer of Learning

Use your chat box:
- What is one thing you heard today that you want to try with a family?

Contact Information

- Rodney Little
  704/221-4671
  rdlittle@email.unc.edu
- Mellicent Blythe
  919/843-7582
  mblythe@email.unc.edu
- John McMahon
  828/670-5051
  jdmcmaho@email.unc.edu
Follow-up Document from the Webinar

Strengthening Parent-Child Visits

Webinar delivered September 28, 2010
Follow-up document date: October 8, 2010
Presented by
Rodney Little and Mellicent Blythe

Produced by
Family and Children’s Resource Program, part of the
Jordan Institute for Families
School of Social Work
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Sponsored by
North Carolina Division of Social Services

Be sure to consult the handouts for this webinar, which contained valuable information, especially for helping children before and after visits. You will find them at the following location:
https://www.ncswlearn.org/ncsts/webinar/handouts/7_Webinar%209-28-10%20Handouts.pdf

Contents

1. Possible Birth Parent Fears about Visitation................................. 1
2. Sample Uses of Pre-Teaching for Visitation Challenges.................. 2
3. Suggestions on Visits from Webinar Participants.......................... 3
4. For Foster Parents: Parent-Child Visits and Shared Parenting ...... 4
5. Additional Resources........................................................................ 6

Possible Birth Parent Fears about Visitation

The following visitation-related birth parent fears were shared by webinar participants:

- Feeling judged
- Doing or saying something wrong, especially in front of a social worker or foster parent, and having it held against them
- Handling discipline, knowing what to do when things go wrong
- Children won’t want to see them
- Children will show greater attachment to foster parent, or compare them to foster parent
- Handling difficult questions and blame from child
- Saying good-bye
- Never getting their children back
## Sample Uses of Pre-Teaching for Visitation Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Possible Focus of Pre-Teaching</th>
<th>Key Points of Pre-Teaching</th>
<th>Sample Questions or Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent doesn’t show up for visit</td>
<td>Birth parent</td>
<td>Even missed visits are opportunities for learning and can be de-briefed</td>
<td>• “I’d like to share with you what happened on Tuesday when you weren’t at the visit.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• “Can you tell me what you were feeling before the visit time/what your worries were about the visit?”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “What could we do next time to help you feel more prepared for/better about the visit?”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Helping the child develop a self-care plan</td>
<td>• “Last time your mom wasn’t able to get to the visit. Tell me about what happened after you got home.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent makes promises they can’t keep (“You’ll be coming home soon”)</td>
<td>Birth parent</td>
<td>Helping the parent to recognize their own emotional response to difficult questions and the impact of a broken promise on the child, and to plan a more helpful response</td>
<td>• “For some parents, one of the hardest parts of a visit is when their child asks to come home. How do you think it might be for you if Annie asks you this?”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “I can understand why your first reaction might be to tell Annie she’ll be home soon. How do you think she might feel when she realizes that’s not true?”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• “Can you think of other ways you might answer that question?”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “Could I share with you some ideas that have worked well for other parents?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent doesn’t interact with child; may focus on complaints about agency instead</td>
<td>Birth parent</td>
<td>Helping the parent recognize their own emotional response to visits, and to plan a visit that’s more helpful for parent and child</td>
<td>• “Tell me what it’s like for you to be at DSS for visits. What’s going on for you when you’re here?”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• [to begin pre-teaching] “Is there anything that might come up in a visit with Annie that you worry about?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child shows attachment to foster parent</td>
<td>Birth parent</td>
<td>Helping the parent recognize their own emotional response, and planning for how to handle the situation in a way that’s helpful for the child</td>
<td>• “For some parents, one of the hardest parts of a visit is seeing their child with the foster parent – maybe even hugging the foster parent. What do you think that might be like for you?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child doesn’t want to visit</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Helping the child identify their emotions and gain a sense of control over the visit</td>
<td>• “You told me last time that you didn’t want to go to see your mom. How come?”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “What feelings come up for you during visits?”</td>
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<td>• For a younger child, use pictures of different facial expressions. “What could we do the next time to help you feel less sad/scared/angry?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child acts out after visits</td>
<td>Foster parent</td>
<td>Helping the foster parent anticipate and understand the emotion behind the acting out, and develop a plan with the child to provide a healthy outlet or comforting</td>
<td>• “What do you expect to happen after Annie’s visit with her mother?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of family-friendly visitation site</td>
<td>Birth parent, foster parent, youth, other CFT members</td>
<td>Increase ownership of all team members to come up with an effective visit location</td>
<td>• “I know that some families really have a hard time with visits at DSS. Let’s think about what else we could do next time, even though we don’t have much money to spend. What kinds of things does your family like to do?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistical challenges (transportation, multiple siblings, etc.)</td>
<td>Birth parent, foster parents, youth, other CFT members</td>
<td>Increase ownership of all team members to come up with an effective visit plan</td>
<td>• “I know how hard it is to get everybody together. Let’s think about what we can each do to make these visits happen.”</td>
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</tbody>
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Suggestions on Visits from Webinar Participants

Free or low-cost visit locations:
- Parks and playgrounds
- Libraries
- Birth parent or foster parent homes
- Visits/contact during school events, doctor and therapy appointments, etc.
- When siblings are in different homes, visits can take place when:
  - The agency holds in-service trainings or events
  - Foster parents babysit for each other
  - They participate in the same activities, such as a sports team, church group, LINKS or SaySo, etc.
  - They attend the same daycare, after-school program, or summer camp

Safety concerns around visits outside the agency:
- Explain to the judge the research and case-specific reasons why visits outside the home will help assess and achieve parenting and permanency goals.
- Visit location should be case-specific and adapted over time, rather than a blanket policy. Consider factors such as past history, recent changes or progress, reason for removal, the level of trust established with the parent over time, the specific risk factors and preventive factors present during the visit, etc.

Giving feedback/coaching parents on visits:
- It might seem less condescending to offer praise about specific things, such as “you did a nice job answering Sara’s questions today,” rather than a general comment like “You did a great job!”
- It’s good to ask a parent if they want a suggestion or advice before you give it.
- We learn to parent from our parents, so it may be helpful to discuss with birth parents how they were parented. This will give you a sense of what they know about parenting.
- If you want someone to consider doing something different, it’s good to open with a question such as, “What do you think about how that visit ended?”
- If you allow parents to be themselves, you can learn a lot more from them; this information will help you help them.
- It’s important to develop visitation and case plans with the parent, and to be sure they meet the parent’s goals and not just the agency’s.
- As social workers, we need to truly believe that not only can parents learn from us, but we can learn from them.
- Use a natural, non-confrontational approach with parents and find teachable moments. For all of us, there are times when we’re open to feedback and help, and times when we’re not.
- We may have to do court reports, but first and foremost we’re social workers who are there to coach and support parents.
For Foster Parents: Parent-Child Visits and Shared Parenting

Shared parenting is a practice in which foster parents cultivate positive, supportive relationships with birth parents. Shared parenting relationships are based on trust, but still keep the safety and best interests of the child in focus.

Parent-child visiting and shared parenting are a natural fit. As Kate, a mother whose child spent time in foster care, explains in the box below, contact between foster and birth parents can sometimes blossom into relationships that help parents make the changes needed reunify their families.

Shared Parenting: A Gradual Process

Shared parenting doesn’t happen all at once. Like most relationships, it usually develops gradually. After the initial meeting during the first week the child enters foster care, shared parenting often starts out with low-level contact between the birth and foster parents—for example, through the exchange of a weekly journal documenting the child’s week and asking questions that only the birth parent can answer.

As everyone grows more comfortable, the relationship between birth and foster parents might progress, involving steps such as:

• Asking the birth parents for family recipes the child enjoys
• Recording the family reading a book and playing it for the child at bedtime
• Going shopping with the birth parent for shoes for the child
• Having dinner at the foster parent’s home.

Visit-Related Shared Parenting

Here are suggestions for engaging in shared parenting in and around parent-child visits:

• Discuss the family’s expectations about contacts and visits within the foster home, birth home, and community. Are visits doable with everyone’s schedule? Can the child call the family whenever he wants or just at certain times of the day?
• Welcome the child’s family into your home, and set boundaries with both the parents and child about any areas that are off limits (usually bedrooms). Or go with the child and the family if the child wants to give a tour of the whole house.
• Encourage regular contact between parents and children, as approved by the placing agency. Help make parents feel comfortable visiting in the foster home, or work with the family to find a neutral spot where everyone feels comfortable (school, a mall, library, restaurant, etc.).
• Reassure the parents that your job as a foster parent is to keep the child safe and provide temporary care. Remind them that you are not a replacement for the child’s parents.
• Bring pictures to visits.
• Send the child to visits dressed in clothing that the birth parents have provided for them.
• Write down important information such as milestones, illnesses, new food choices, and updates in a journal and send it with the child to visits.
• Try to arrange the child’s schedule so that the birth parent can feed the baby a bottle or give their child a snack during the visit.

(Foster, 2009; Buncombe Co. DSS, 2009)

What Shared Parenting Accomplishes

• Child’s relationship with the birth parent is maintained
Working Together to Help Darren Return Home

I visited Darren a lot while he was in foster care and worked hard to get him back. Even though I had two relapses, I went to school full-time and worked part-time. I lived in a shelter some of the time, and I got TANF. Although I wasn’t told where Darren’s foster home was, I knew because some of the forms that I got from the doctor after Darren’s appointments had the foster home address on them. I did not go to the foster home, but it was comforting for me to know where he lived...

After our visits, I always took Darren back to the agency where his foster mother would pick him up. For about a year, I never saw her. One day the agency worker had to leave before the foster mother arrived, so she asked if I would stay with Darren until his foster mother came. When we met, we were both very stiff, sizing each other up, and didn’t think we would like each other. But we were cordial. Shortly after this, Darren’s foster mother, Sally, called to tell me that Darren was going to be in a pageant at her church, and she invited me to come. Sally began to invite me to go on other outings with her and Darren. Gradually, we got used to each other, liked each other, and started working together to help Darren return home.

Getting to know Sally is what “did it”. . . . Sally helped Darren and me gradually become a family again.

Darren’s Mom, Kate: Darren is the one who has benefited the most from the way that Sally and I work together. Sally never tried to replace me in Darren’s life. She told him that he couldn’t be with me because I was sick and was trying to get better. She let me become very involved in Darren’s life while he lived in her home, and she came to every court hearing with me. She didn’t let him call her mom, it was Mom Sally or just Sally. Now that he is living with me, he calls her Aunt Sally.

Darren has been home for 5 years. He is now 10 years old, and Sally is still a part of our lives. Darren has ADHD and goes for a lot of treatment and doctor’s appointments. Sally has a medical background so she comes with us on these appointments and for IEP meetings at school. She knows what questions to ask.

Foster Mom, Sally: Kate allows me to co-parent Darren, even after he returned to her home. We have the benefits of co-parenting without having to go through a marriage and a divorce. Darren goes with me on my summer vacation. . . .

Darren’s Mom, Kate: When Darren lived with Sally, we tried to have the same rules for him so he wouldn’t be confused. When he came to visit me, I tried to keep the same routine and rules that Sally had established. The three of us went to counseling together. This helped ease the transition for Darren. Now that Darren is older, we are more flexible. He can understand that he has to follow Sally’s rules at her house, and my rules in my house. When Darren first came home, I called Sally a lot, probably too much. But I gradually began to have confidence in myself and called less.
**Foster Mom, Sally:** This story is about Darren, not about us. As Kate said, Darren is the one who has benefited the most from our working together. He has not had to leave behind any of the people that he has grown up with. He has a larger extended family than he would have had. He was a troubled little boy when he came into foster care at two and a half years old. He had hearing and speech problems, night terrors, and couldn’t be contained for a very long period of time. But he was always loving and smiling. . . .

**Darren’s Mom, Kate:** I always knew that Sally had Darren’s best interests in her heart and that she was working with me and not against me. I knew what I had to do to get Darren back home. Sally didn’t make me do any of these things, but she supported all of my efforts.


Reprinted from *Fostering Perspectives* ([www.fosteringperspectives.org](http://www.fosteringperspectives.org)) vol. 15, no. 1, Nov. 2010

**Additional Resources**

1. *What to Do and Say When a Child Asks an Unanswerable Question*  
   http://www.practicenotes.org/v15n1/unanswerable.htm

2. Exchange Clubs  
   General Information: [http://www.nationalexchangeclub.org/membership/information.htm](http://www.nationalexchangeclub.org/membership/information.htm)  
   NC Exchange Clubs:  
   Exchange Club Foundation Child Abuse Prevention Centers  