Revisiting Visitation Practices as They Apply to and Inform Reasonable Efforts: A Case for Progressive Visits

There are two purposes for children and their parents to visit when the child is in an out-of-home placement.

1. The first and primary reason is to help children maintain and enhance their attachment with their parents, siblings and others with whom they have emotional connections. Healthy attachments are an essential part of the child's developmental progress and is essential to the child's sense of permanency.
2. The second is to enable the parent to learn, practice and demonstrate improved parenting skills related to the substantiated maltreatment. This is essential, as the ability of the parent to meet the child's safety and well-being needs is a key factor in determining the child's permanency plan.

Connection planning is a complex decision process based on the following factors:

1. The developmental age of the child, how to meet the child's attachment needs and what the child desires;
2. The type of maltreatment that the child experienced;
3. The length of time in care the child has been in care and the focus of the agency's work with the family (stages of care: initial placement and assessment, reasonable efforts work, making final permanency decision and post permanency decision, and the rest of the child's life);
4. Family culture; and
5. Special needs of child or parent: addiction, mental health, domestic violence, educational or developmental delays, educational needs, behavioral problems, medical conditions, etc.

Connection Plan – The written plan that describes how the child's connections will be maintained and enhanced. This includes parent/child visits as well as living with or contact with siblings, visits with extended family and non-related family members, support to stay in the same school, and encouraging cultural and community connections.
The plan contains progressive steps to teach and assess the parent's ability to effectively meet the child's needs.

Guiding Rules for Visits

The court, agency, parents and all the adults must work together to make visits safe and healthy experiences for the child. The guidelines presented in this paper should never be used as absolutes, as each child and family is unique. The golden rule of all visits should be: <u>Visits will always be safe, non-traumatizing and encourage healthy attachments.</u> Additionally it is recommended that the following rules be used in developing and evaluating visits.

2. Both children and parents have right and need to have contact while not living together, when it is not possible to meet everyone's needs, the child's rights and needs must come first.
3. Visits should be making regular progressive steps towards the goal of overnight, unsupervised visits in the family's home. If safe progress cannot be made, a case planning meeting or court review should occur to determine the reason and possible solutions.
4. Visits are designed so the child and parent (sibling and other family members) maintain and enhance a healthy attachment.
5. No child should ever be forced to attend or complete a visit when by her behaviors or words it is clear that the child does not want to be there.
6. If the parent and child cannot have healthy interactions during a visit, even after being provided coaching or redirection, that visit should end early. Visits are not to be used to catch a parent doing it wrong.
7. When a child is upset by visits there are many possible explanations and many possible solutions. Terminating visits should only be used when all other solutions have been tried. It is essential to try other solutions as a child should not continue to have visits that are upsetting. Many children are upset by visits as they are experiencing the grief and loss of not living with their family and increasing the frequency of visits may be the most appropriate response. Example: Child cries for many minutes at the end of a visit. Determine how to make visits end in a manner that will not upset the child rather than terminate future visits.
8. Visits should occur in the home-like locations and other places where families usually interact. The balance is that the location must provide adequate safety for all parties. Children should not have to wait until reunification occurs to visit their home or see their pet.
9. Every child will should have a Connection Plan that includes the highest level of contact that is possible for the child that meets these rules. The plan must include contact with siblings and other people important to the child including the non-custodial father and his family.
10. Children should be allowed to have contact with the people he or she identifies as important even if that person has not started treatment or has abused the child. It is the adults' responsibility to find a way to have safe contact (not necessarily face-to-face) with the person the child wishes to see and not to just deny the child's request.
11. The need to terminate or limit contact with one family member should not mean terminating contact with other family members.
12. Terminating all forms of contact with a parent is likely to mean that termination of parental rights must occur. The decision to terminate all contact requires careful consideration and court review.

Resources

- Child Welfare Information Gateway – www.childwelfare.gov
- National Resource Center for Family Connections and Permanency www.nrcfcp.org
- CA Clearinghouse on Evidence Based Practices http://www.cachildwelfareclearinghouse.org/
- Rose Wentz www.wentztraining.com