

# Improving Outcomes for Children and Families



## PIP TIPS: Item 13 Visits with Parents

Each monthly issue of Program Improvement Plan (PIP) Tips focuses on one aspect of the safety, permanency and well-being of children in Minnesota. This issue examines visits between children in foster care and their parents, included in permanency outcome 2. A later issue of PIP Tips will address the second part of this performance item: visits between siblings in foster care.

### Permanency Outcome 2:

The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

### Related Performance Items:

Item 11: Proximity of foster care placement

Item 12: Placement with siblings

**Item 13: Visits with parents and siblings in foster care**

Item 14: Preserving connections

Item 15: Relative placement

Item 16: Relationship of child in care with parents

The Minnesota Child and Family Service Review assesses visits with parents based on the following criteria:

- Frequency of visits with mothers and fathers
- Visits meet the needs of child and family
- Efforts made by the agency to promote and support visitation.

In Minnesota's 2001 federal Child and Family Service Review, visits with parents had a finding of Area Needing Improvement. The finding was based in part on the practice of some residential care providers who used denial of visits as punishment for a child's behavior. This violates the rights of children and families to have contact. DHS recommends including language in host county contracts or service agreements between counties and providers to prohibit this practice.

Statewide performance on visits with parents and siblings in foster care, measured by the Minnesota Child and Family Service Review, improved by nearly 19 percent from 2001 through 2003.

Nationwide, findings from the federal Child and Family Service Reviews on visits with parents demonstrate that visits with mothers occur more consistently and frequently than visits with fathers.

The Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews rated visits with parents and siblings a Strength in 87 percent of the cases reviewed in 2003. In a ranked order of performance on all items, visits with parents and siblings ranked 10 out of 23.

*"Visiting between parents and their children in foster care is generally considered to be the most important factor contributing to timely reunification" (Dougherty, 2004).*

**The Minnesota Department of Human Services and County Social Service Agencies:  
Working Together to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families**



## **Putting good practice into practice**

One county has convened a work group including agency supervisors, social workers, foster parents and parent representatives to study and develop a comprehensive agency policy to guide social work practice related to parent and child visits. Policy development is being guided by resources available from the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning (Hess, 2003).

Research on parental visiting of children in foster care indicates a strong relationship between the development of a visiting plan and actual visitation by parents. Social worker attitudes and behaviors that express encouragement for visiting also have a positive influence on parent visitation (Center for Advanced Studies on Child Welfare, 1997).

## **Frequency of visits**

Frequency of visits between parents and their child in foster care should correlate with the child's age and development, and be consistent with the child's permanency goal. Special efforts should be made to include both the child's mother and father in visitation planning. In some cases, this may require the development of separate plans. Several visits per week will generally be necessary to promote and maintain a parent/child bond for infants and preschool children. Additional contacts such as telephone calls or parent attendance at a child's activities may be included in a visitation plan but should not replace scheduled in-person visits.

## **Meeting the needs of children and families**

Visits are essential to promoting and maintaining connections between parents and their children during placement. Visitation plans should be developed jointly with the family, and include careful consideration of location, duration, activity and level of supervision. Generally, visits should be planned for the least restrictive, most normal

environment and activity possible that can assure the safety of the child.

Plans for supervising visits should be individualized and document the correlation to the child's safety and goals of their case plan. At times, supervision may be planned to allow observation of parent/child interactions for the purpose of assessing readiness for reunification.

## **Agency efforts in parent/child visits**

Agencies promote and support frequent and meaningful visits by: engaging the child and parents in the development of written visitation plans; arranging transportation or other supports to facilitate attendance at visits; actively encouraging visits during worker meetings with parents; ensuring that parents are involved in the child's school and other activities; helping parents plan activities and prepare for upcoming visits; and providing for flexible visiting locations and schedules. Thorough and ongoing assessment of parents' strengths and needs is essential to planning and carrying out safe and meaningful visits between children in foster care and their parents.

## **Minnesota requirements**

Development of an individualized visitation plan is required in every placement case as part of the child's out-of-home-placement plan.

Minnesota Rules and Statute provide minimal guidance on the issue of visits between parents and their children in foster care. This guidance is found in Minnesota Rule parts, 9560.0603, subpart 4 G and 2960.3080, subpart 9; and in Minnesota Statute 260C.176, 260C.201 and 260C.212, available on the Supervisor's Web site.

DHS Bulletin #03-68-04, *Improving Outcomes for Children*, provides considerable practice and policy guidance for developing and carrying out effective plans for parent-child visits.

DHS Bulletin #02-33-01, *Revision of Out-of-Home Placement Plan for Children* provides general guidance for developing the visitation plan as a required component of the placement plan.

### **Counties can improve and monitor performance on visits with parents**

- Include language in host county contracts and service agreements that expressly prohibits residential care providers from using visits as a reward or punishment for a child's behavior
- Develop agency policies regarding the process and content of visitation plans
- Develop agency policies regarding visitation plans that address separate needs of mothers and fathers when necessary
- Develop guidelines that define the roles and responsibilities of workers, parents and foster parents for visits between parent's and children
- Assess adequacy of agency resources and community based services necessary to promote and support visits between parents and children
- Institute naming protocols in SSIS chronology to clearly track the development and progress of the child's visitation plan. For example, when entering case *activity*, enter "visitation" in the *purpose* line. When entering a *case note* that visitation took place, enter the word "visitation" in the *comments* line. The number of completed visits will be easily viewable. Descriptors can be entered into these sections, such as "visitation-cancelled" or "visitation-successful"
- Discuss visits between parents and children during supervisor consultations
- Conduct regular supervisory reviews that target visits between parents and children.

### **Resources and technical assistance**

- Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) Practice Notes, (1997) issue Number One. Available:

[http://ssw.che.umn.edu.cascw/Practice%20Notes/practice\\_notes1.htm](http://ssw.che.umn.edu.cascw/Practice%20Notes/practice_notes1.htm)

- *Case Review and Consultation Guide* (Based on Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews). Available: [Supervisor's Web site](#)
- DHS Bulletin #02-33-01, *Revision of Out-of-Home Placement Plan for Children*, issued February 2002
- DHS Bulletin #03-68-04, *Improving Outcomes for Children*, issued April 2003
- Dougherty, S. (April 2004). *Promising Practices in Reunification*, National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning. Available: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp.html>
- Hess, P. (October 2003). *Visiting Between Children in Care and Their Families: A Look at Current Policy*. Available: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp.html>.

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