

# IDEAS IN PRACTICE

## QUALITY CASEWORKER VISITS

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*Kathy Tidwell, Director BSN Child Welfare Center*

**W**hen I stop long enough to really think about things, it is amazing to me just how many parallels there are in our system. In preparation for writing about “quality visitation”, I reviewed the data from the “Youth Focus Groups” conducted in July, 2008 and the Focus Group data from the child welfare conference in September, 2008. The Table below provides a sample of some of the responses. Each part of the system is telling us exactly what we need to know to improve the quality of visits. Perhaps it is a bit of a circular process, where each group must meet the needs of the next group in order for us all to be successful. Managers need to meet the needs of supervisors; supervisors need to meet the needs of caseworkers, and; caseworkers need to meet the needs of children, youth and families. When all of this comes together and there are good outcomes for families, it motivates caseworkers and supervisors to continue in this important work.



Youth	Caseworkers	Supervisors
<p>“What could be done to make visits with your caseworkers better?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Just be nice when you visit</li> <li>• We want more meals, less paperwork and more activities</li> <li>• More honesty</li> <li>• More visits</li> <li>• Be on time and don't postpone or cancel</li> <li>• Return phone calls</li> <li>• Communicate with me and let me tell you what is going on</li> <li>• Let me see my family &amp; friends</li> </ul>	<p>“What do you need from supervisors?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good support</li> <li>• Appreciation</li> <li>• Verbal reinforcement</li> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Clear and open communication about the big picture</li> <li>• Hear our voice</li> <li>• Listen and respond</li> <li>• Honesty</li> <li>• Weekly staff meetings that include self care</li> <li>• Identify my strengths</li> <li>• Support my family priorities</li> <li>• Stay—need stability</li> </ul>	<p>“What would keep you inspired for the next 2-5 years?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schedule flexibility</li> <li>• Ability to Telecommute</li> <li>• Work-out room; chair massages</li> <li>• Staff who stay</li> <li>• Administrative support</li> <li>• Encouragement and positive feedback</li> <li>• Opportunities for learning</li> </ul>

# Insuring Quality Caseworker Visits

By Mechelle Wilson, LCSW

## Tips for Increasing Quality

Idaho currently has a Contact Standard, and additional rules regarding what should be included in the visits with the foster child/youth and the resource family. Each visit should have a defined purpose related to assessing and monitoring the family's progress toward reducing safety/risk issues and monitoring the child's safety and well-being. Some issues to consider:

- *Observation and assessment of the child's safety, emotional and physical health, developmental status and general well-being.*
- *Assessment of the adequacy of the home environment.*
- *Observation of the child with other children or individuals living in the home.*
- *Observation of any changes in the household composition.*
- *Assessment of services provided to the child and parent and identification of additional services that may be needed.*
- *Review of the child/parent visitation plan (out-of-home cases).*
- *Review of progress towards case plan goals and objectives.*
- *Discussion of court recommendations or plans for closing the case when applicable.* (National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning – Caseworker Visits with Children in Out-of-Home Care; July 24, 2008)

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning developed training specifically for visitation, believing that child/youth safety, well-being and

permanency is directly impacted by the increased quality of the visits between the caseworker and the child/youth. Further, increasing the quality of the visits between the caseworker and the resource family increases the child/youth's stability in the home, and im-



proves the ability for all of the adults to help in accurately assessing needs.

The foundation for the National Resource Center visitation is drawn from the PRIDE model, and is entitled **The Four-Step Planning Pro-**

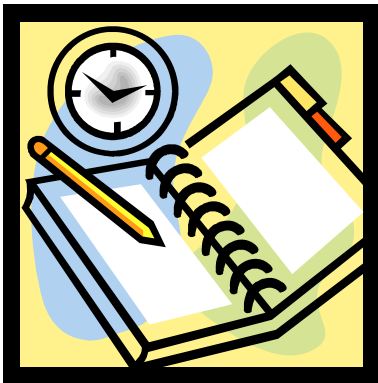
**cess.** What follows is a summary of that training, which is also incorporated into Idaho's New Worker Academy.

## Step One: Preparation

Be respectful of everyone's time and schedule visits with the child/ youth and their foster family in advance. Have a beginning and end time, as this will keep all of you focused and attentive to the agenda. Be strengths-focused and attempt to find times that fit with everyone's schedule. Consider the developmental age of the child, and ask when naps and meals are. Trying to assess a child who is sleepy and hungry can be frustrating for everyone. Be considerate of youth who have demanding school schedules and even after-school jobs.

The same consideration needs to be made for the foster family and their busy schedules. Ask when the most convenient time is to schedule a visit.

Preparing adequately for a visit includes reviewing the service plan and what has transpired in the case since the last visit. Review case progress toward safety, well-being and permanency, utilizing ASFA time frames. Assess whether you have any concerns about the case progress, or if you can identify any potential barriers to progress. Identify questions prior to the visit that you want to ask directly related to safety, well-being and permanency. Some helpful questions are provided on the links found on page 4.



The visit between you and the child/youth and the resource parent is not a “friendly visit” where you casually chat about how the children are doing. These are

times of assessment, and the resource parent is your primary professional ally in maintaining placement stability and in assessing the needs of the child. Everyone’s time is valuable. Call the resource family in advance and get their input on what needs to be discussed. Create an **agenda**. This agenda may be standardized to include the areas you always want to cover with the child/youth and resource family, but it should have input from the resource family and the child/youth, especially if the youth is older.

Are there times when the worker should make unannounced visits to the resource family? Of course, if there are specific concerns the work-

er has that warrants this type of contact. The majority of visits, however, should be planned.

### *Step Two: Exploration*

The caseworker and the resource family review the agenda and the timeframe for the visit. This task helps to focus everyone on the purpose of the visit. Make any necessary additions or deletions from the agenda. This is also the time to engage in discussions around the topics and questions you identified when reviewing the case prior to the visit. Use open-ended questions when needed, and always remember to spend some part of the visit alone with each child/youth.

### *Step Three: Direction*

The caseworker uses the service plan as the basis for discussing progress and barriers in reaching goals. Discuss possible solutions to the barriers in reaching goals of safety, well-being and permanency.

Use a strengths-based perspective, and identify strengths and needs of the resource family. Identify areas when you would like to see changes or improvements before the next visit. Resource parents have received PRIDE training, which introduces them to several tools that may be helpful to you in your assessment of the child/youth’s needs. Have a professional discussion about their assessment of the child. Also, identify services the resource family may have in helping them to maintain the child’s stability in their home.

### *Step Four: Wrapping Up*

Review the visit with the child/youth and the resource family. Were there any specific strengths or needs identified?

Discuss a plan for meeting those needs prior to the next visit.

Make arrangements for the next face to face visit.

**Casework is an incredibly busy job responsibility. Many caseworkers feel that much of their time is spent “putting out fires.” However, with careful assessment and planning, many crises can be averted. Respect of time and resources is modeled for everyone involved – the child/youth and the resource family.**

**Resources:**

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning; *Promoting Placement Stability and Permanency through Caseworker/Child Visits – A One Day Training Program*; [www.nrcfcppp.org](http://www.nrcfcppp.org)

Iowa Department of Human Services; *Worker’s Role: Visits with Children*, *Practice Bulletin-February 2008*

The National Resource Center for Family –Centered Practice and Permanency Planning; *Permanency Planning Today, Summer 2008*

North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children’s Resource Program; *Child Welfare Worker Visits with Children in Foster Care; Practice Notes, Vol. 12, No. 2, April 2007*

State Standards and Practices for Content of Caseworker Visits with Children in Foster Care; *Appendix A*

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare – College of Education & Human Development, University of Minnesota; *Practice Notes – Visiting Children in Foster Care: Messages from the Practice Field; Issue #21, Summer 2008*

>[http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/visitingModule3\\_0508.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/visitingModule3_0508.pdf)

><http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Infants.pdf>

><http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Toddlers.pdf>

><http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Preschool.pdf>

><http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Schoolage.pdf>

>[http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Early\\_adolescence.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Early_adolescence.pdf)

>[http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Middle\\_Adolescence.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Middle_Adolescence.pdf)

>[http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Late\\_Adolescence.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/Late_Adolescence.pdf)

## “PRIDE Corner”

By Shawna Manhire, LMSW

During PRIDE, resource families are taught that children who enter foster care often have developmental delays; therefore, care of the child should be at his or her developmental stage rather than his or her chronological age in order for the child to appropriately move forward to the next stage. Inevitably, one of the questions I am frequently asked is “Does the case worker sit down with us to review the child’s developmental stages in order to help us determine where the child is at?” One of the most valued tools families are given during PRIDE is the “Summary of Stages of Child Growth and Development” on page 78 of the PRIDE book. This is a great tool for you to use with the resource family during a visit to assess a child’s development at various increments throughout time in care. As a team, you may find the child to be incredibly resilient with minimal or no delays, or several delays may be identified which would warrant further assessment. Either way, it is a great reminder to “start where the client is”.

Here’s what resource parents have to say about the great work you are doing:

“A couple of years ago, I had a little boy who was micro cephalic. He was so difficult, and the caseworker was so helpful. His parents were together, but were both quite disabled. I had him for six

months; his parents had a small support system, and loved him dearly. They had not hurt him. Right before the 6 month review, I asked the caseworker what she was going to suggest, and she stated that since they were doing so well, she was going to ask for 3 more months in foster care, and then request the judge send him home judge send him home. We talked and I told her I just could not do another three months, and it seemed to me they were doing well with him. She said I will talk with my team and supervisor and get their input. She called me a day or so later and told me they agreed with me, and she would request an extended home visit for three months and if it worked, he could stay home. It worked well, and they took their child home. It is so good to, as a team, have my inputs listened to, and then agree on what is best for the child.”

*Resource Parent, Region4*



"Foster parents need to know without a doubt that their caseworker loves and cares for their foster child almost as much as they do. The monthly visits are a great time for workers to display a personal touch with the families and most importantly the child. Engaging with the child at their level and showing a genuine interest in them and their feelings is so important. Our confidence and trust is built up each month that this hap-

pens. Practical ways that our workers have done this is to read books to the children, have tea parties, play with blocks and puzzles and to talk with the children as they do so. The children have wished to share new accomplishments with their workers and it is great to see how proud they are of them. Other children in the home benefit from this kind of attention and interaction as well. In this way we are all being respected and treated as a "real" family.

We hope to have lifelong connections with our caseworkers and keep them in the lives of our children. The greatest blessing you can give me is to love my children."

*Resource Parent, Region 1*

## ***For Supervisors***

### Suggested Discussion Points:

1. At a staff meeting, discuss the case review and planning process each worker goes through prior to visits. Are there helpful strategies staff can share with one another?
2. Begin to evaluate with your staff the benefits to planning visits. Can they reduce crisis calls?
3. At a staff meeting, discuss any specific exploratory questions workers have found especially helpful when assessing safety and well-being with various developmental groups.
4. Review the referenced developmental documents from the National Resource Center at a staff meeting.