

Familyconnect

Putting the pieces of family visits together



A guide for foster parents



Importance of family connections...

Foster care is more than just keeping children safe. As a foster parent, you have the opportunity to help children and families develop stronger connections, whether or not children return to their birth family. Family visits can be one of the most valuable opportunities for children to heal and cope with the trauma of being separated from their family. Research shows that when children have regular, frequent contact with their family while living in foster care they experience shorter foster care placements, less reentry into foster care, more successful reunification and overall improved emotional well being.

"I've never met a kid that didn't want to go home....no matter what the problems were in their family...."

Written by Wendy Negaard

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Introduction

Understanding Family Visits

This guide is based on information collected through interviewing foster parents, social workers, children and birth parents. It provides information about:

- ✿ What to expect regarding your role in family visits;
- ✿ Typical reactions children and parents may have before and after visits;
- ✿ Relating effectively with birth parents; and
- ✿ Strategies in preparing and transitioning children to and from family visits.

Foster parents can be key to making a child's time with their family positive...coordinating schedules, driving children to and from visits, preparing children, sometimes supervising visits, mentoring birth parents and supporting children after a family visit. Good training and preparation as well as on-going support will help you be a strong resource for children and their birth families.



Transition

Foster parents consistently identified children’s transitions from their family visits back to the foster home as the most challenging aspect of visitation. Helping children to develop a transition plan that gives them what they need to “shift gears” can help validate their mixed up feelings. Providing structure can help make transitions easier.

Understanding how you deal with change can help you be more mindful of how others may respond, especially children who are still learning to communicate and manage their emotions. Whether children adjust quickly or are still adjusting before their next family visit, it’s important to give them some useful tools to adjust at their own pace with acceptance and encouragement.

Transition CHECK

I tend to adjust to (positive or negative) changes and transition:

- Easily/Quickly
- Slowly
- With resistance
- I love change, keeps me on my toes
- With a lot of support from friends and family

When dealing with children’s reactions to change and transition, I:

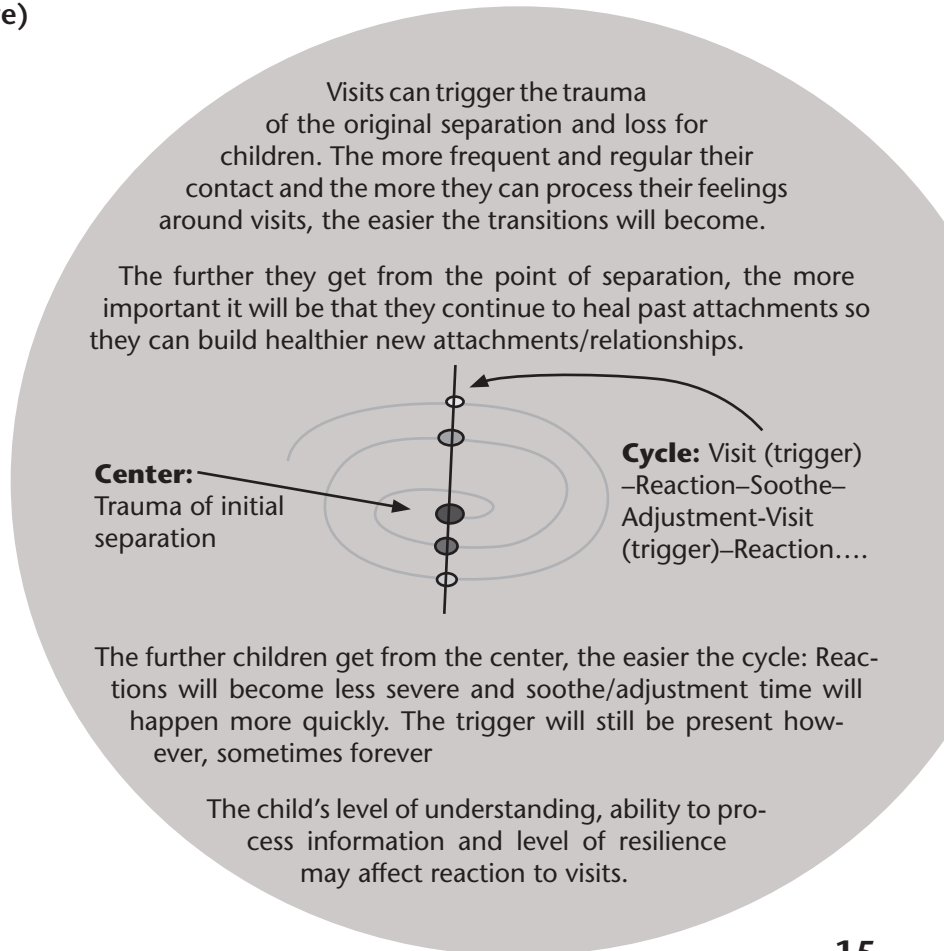
- Want to fix it
- Get overwhelmed
- Feel frustrated
- Tend to be patient
- Listen and try to support their feelings
- Ask them what they need
- Try to keep things calm and “normal”

Put yourself in the birth parents shoes and imagine saying goodbye to your own children after your time together, I would:

- Try to do what was best for my kids— “you do what you got to do”
- Feel jealous
- Want to take them and run
- Feel worried and/or helpless
- Feel angry
- Want to avoid the pain of the whole thing

My experience with transitions before and after family visits has been;

- Mostly positive
- Challenging
- Depends on family/child
- An opportunity to build a positive relationship with the family
- It’s a good teachable time



Things to Consider....

Establish and maintain a routine.

Have your child pick a 15 minute activity they do before and after every visit—even if it's during the car ride.

Establish and maintain a "goodbye" ritual before you leave a child with their birth parent.

For example, have the child high five, blow a kiss, "see you later alligator" as a signal that you are leaving and will be back when their family time is over.

Be on time for all drop-offs and pick-ups

Be courteous and positive with their parent. Avoid arguments.

Recognize that children might need some time to be alone after a visit.

Establish a "hello" ritual.

Once children have arrived back to your home and have some time to unwind, try playing a game, reading a book or finding something to do that makes the child feel special.

Acknowledge the child's feelings.

Let them know you are willing to listen if and when they want to talk about their feelings.



Words That Heal...

Reassure

"I'll be in the kitchen if you want to talk about how things went with your family."

"You are a strong kid and I know you will get through this okay. I will be here for you when you need me."

"Your mom/dad is going through hard time right now and couldn't get to your visit. They still love you and none of this is your fault."

Normalize

"I used to go to my grandma's for the summer and it always took me a while to get settled—everything was different."

"It's hard for lots of kids in foster care to go from their family, back to their foster home and not know what's going to happen next."

"My daughter called me crying everyday for a month after she left for college. Change was really hard for her too."

Set Boundaries

"I know you really want to stay here with your family but I need you to get buckled so you are safe."

"I'm really happy your dad gave you that fun video game at your visit but homework needs to be finished before you can play with it."

"If you keep all your thoughts and feelings inside, they start to build up and cause other problems. If you don't want to talk to me, let's find someone else you feel comfortable talking with."