



Practice Guide for Maintaining Family Connections for Children in Foster Care

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Introduction

This practice guide supports the phase-in implementation for the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (MAAFPCWDA). It is an updated version of the Practice Guide to Supporting Lasting Reunification and Preserving Family Connections for Children in Foster Care (DHS-5552).

For children in foster care, visitation maintains connections and relationships while supporting a child's well-being and sense of self-identity. It promotes timely reunification and preserves family and cultural connections that have lifelong significance for children in foster care. Parent/s, Indian custodians, siblings and extended family continue to be important in children's lives even when reunification is not possible.

The primary purposes of visitation are to establish or maintain the parent-child attachment, reduce a child's sense of abandonment and preserve their sense of belonging as part of their family of origin, culture and community. A child needs to see and have regular contact with their parent/s and family, as these relationships are the foundation of a child's development. When a child loses family connections, they lose family history, medical history and cultural identity.

As family needs differ, developing individualized visitation plans based on the child's age, development, and trauma history is important for meeting each child's unique needs.

These guidelines apply to all children in foster care placed through juvenile protection proceedings ([Minnesota Statutes 260](#) and [Minnesota Statutes 260C](#)) and voluntary placement agreements ([Minnesota Statutes 260C](#) and [Minnesota Statutes 260D](#)).

Benefits of visitation

Best practice for visitation is face-to-face contact; however, there are other forms of contact that can supplement visitation and maintain connections, including telephone, text message, social media, letters and video calls. When working with the identified parents ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.007, subd. 25](#)), the responsible social service agency provides notice of the benefits of parent-child visitation with the out-of-home placement plan ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.219, subd. 2\(7\)](#)).

Visitation:

- Increases the likelihood of reunification, which reduces the time in out-of-home care
- Assists in the assessment and decision-making process regarding parenting capacities and permanency goals
- Facilitates permanency planning and the decision-making process to establish alternative permanency plans
- Supports parent-child attachment
- Eases the pain of separation for all
- Maintains connections and strengthens family relationships

- Maintains relationships with siblings and others who have a significant role in a child's life
- Provides opportunities for parent/s to learn and try new skills
- Reassures a child that their parent/s is/are all right and helps reduce self-blame for placement
- Supports the family in dealing with changing relationships
- Enhances parent motivation to change by providing reassurance that the parent-child relationship is important for a child's well-being
- Supports a child's adjustment to the foster home
- Enables parent/s to be active and stay current with their child's development, educational and medical needs, faith-based community and community activities
- Provides opportunities for parent/s to assess how their child is doing and share information about how to meet their child's needs.

The frequency of a child's visits with their parents can impact their behavior and well-being.

Children in out-of-home care who:

- Were visited frequently (weekly or biweekly) exhibited fewer behavioral problems than children who were visited infrequently (once a month or less) or not at all; overall, children who had frequent contact with their parent/s showed less anxiety and depression than children whose parents' visits were either infrequent or nonexistent (Cantos & Gries, 1997)
- Saw their parent/s less than once a month felt they suffered due to not maintaining contact with their parent/s (Kufeldt & Armstrong, 1995)
- Were visited frequently by their parent/s were more likely to have higher well-being ratings, and adjusted better to placement, were more likely to be discharged from placement and experienced shorter placements (Hess, 2003).

The absence of regular and frequent parent-child visitation or contact may have serious consequences for children and their parent/s. Without visitation, relationships can deteriorate, and both a child and their parent/s can become emotionally detached. If this detachment occurs, reunification becomes more difficult. Visitation for a child must not be restricted because of a child's behavior.

The local social services agency with legal responsibility for the placement is responsible for assessing, arranging and providing efforts to support visitation for a child in out-of-home placement. Caseworkers can begin engaging parent/s and foster parents about visitation during their initial phone call. When a child enters foster care or changes placement, an initial call between the foster parent/facility and parent/s must occur as soon as possible but no later than 72 hours ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.219, subd. 6](#)).

See [Initial foster care phone calls: Practice guide for social service agencies](#) (DHS-7295A) and [Initial foster care phone calls: Information for parents, foster parents and facility staff](#) (DHS-7295B) for detailed information on initial phone calls.

Cultural considerations for visitation

Special considerations regarding visitation, active efforts and individuals considered to be relatives are needed for children and families that fall within the scope of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), the Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act (MIFPA) and/or the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionalities Act (MAAFPCWDA).

Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act (MIFPA)

MIFPA requires that children have visitation in the most natural setting that ensures a child's safety. Whenever possible, visitation should:

- Occur in the home of the Indian child's parent, Indian custodian or other family member or in another noninstitutional setting
- Allow natural, unsupervised interaction with parents, siblings and other relatives.

If the responsible social services agency staff and court determine a child's safety requires supervised visitation, staff are to consult with a Tribal representative to determine and arrange for the most natural setting possible. ([Minnesota Statutes 260.762 subd. 3\(7\)](#)).

ICWA and MIFPA active efforts

[Active efforts](#) to maintain or reunite an Indian child with their family and Tribe must be affirmative, thorough and timely. The specific nature of these efforts will vary depending on the individual case and family's needs.

Child placing agencies must consult with the child's Tribe to understand the family structure and ensure Tribal participation throughout the process, including settings for visitations. Child-placing agencies are responsible for arranging visitations in the least restrictive and noninstitutional setting with the child's parent, Indian custodian, siblings or other family members to maintain close contact.

Additionally, MIFPA's active efforts include acknowledging and using the traditional helping and healing systems of an Indian child's Tribe and incorporating them when planning visitations.

Active efforts for an Indian child visitation can include, but are not limited to:

- Arranging for visitation to occur in the most natural setting for the child; this would include consultation with the child and the child's parent or Indian custodian to determine what the most natural setting for their visitation
- Seeking guidance and engaging the child's Tribe for the most culturally appropriate setting
- Considering alternative ways to ensure the child is comfortable
- Ongoing engagement with relatives in case planning and visitation
- Providing supports to the child
- Utilizing culturally appropriate community resources and supporting participation in community events and ceremonies

- Actively assisting the family to overcome obstacles such as transportation and financial barriers
- Ongoing assessment of the visitation plan and updating as needed in collaboration with the child's Tribe(s) to accommodate the current needs of the family.

Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (MAAFPCWDA)

The Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (MAAFPCWDA) is effective for Hennepin County and Ramsey County on Jan. 1, 2025, and July 1, 2027, for all other counties.

Social services agencies must engage in best practices related to visitation when an African American or a disproportionately represented child is in out-of-home placement. When the child is in out-of-home placement, the responsible social services agency caseworker shall make active efforts to facilitate regular and frequent visitation between the child and the child's parents or custodians, the child's siblings and the child's relatives. If visitation is infrequent between the child and the child's parents, custodians, siblings or relatives, the agency shall make active efforts to increase the frequency of visitation and address any barriers to visitation ([Minnesota Statutes 260.641](#)).

MAAFPCWDA active efforts

The responsible social services agency must provide active efforts for cases involving children that have protections under MAAFPCWDA. Active efforts means a rigorous and concerted level of effort that the responsible social services agency must continuously make throughout their involvement with an African American or a disproportionately represented child and the child's family. This includes applying active efforts to establishing, developing and/or maintaining a child's connections and relationships with their parents, siblings and other family members. This will look different for each family, depending on their specific needs. The court reviews and makes findings regarding active efforts and whether the responsible social services agency made appropriate and meaningful services available to the child's family based upon the family's specific needs ([Minnesota Statutes 260.64, subd. 4](#)). Active efforts for visitation for an African American or disproportionately represented child and the child's family can include, but is not limited to:

- Arranging for visitation to occur in the most natural setting for the child; this may involve consultation with the child and child's parent to determine the most natural setting for their visitation
- Considering alternative ways to ensure the child is comfortable
- Engaging relatives in case planning and visitation
- Providing supports to the child
- Utilizing culturally appropriate community resources
- Assisting the family to overcome obstacles such as transportation and financial barriers
- Ongoing assessment of the visitation plan and updating it as needed to accommodate the current needs of the family.

Engaging fathers

Fathers play an essential role in their child's development. Research shows that outcomes for children improve when they have high-quality relationships and safe and healthy interactions with their fathers (including biological, noncustodial, fictive kin and adoptive). Fathers receive equal consideration and involvement in visitation planning.

Consider the following practices to increase a child's father's involvement.

- Make efforts to immediately identify and contact the father when a child is removed.
- Discuss with both parents the importance of the father's involvement in their child's life. A father's involvement is discussed with other members of the case (child, other relatives) even if the mother disagrees.
- Make face-to-face contact with fathers to discuss visits and inquire about supports (financial, emotional, housing, food, educational, etc.) they may need.
- Support them to provide care to their children, which may be something they are doing for the first time.
- Engage fathers to develop the out-of-home placement plan, which includes the visitation plan.
- Keep fathers equally informed about their child's appointments and activities, which encourages them to be involved.
- Ensure that foster parents know about the father's involvement and what their role is in keeping the father involved in visitation and other activities.

Supervised visitation

Supervised visitation is used to ensure a child's physical and emotional safety during contact with a parent or other family member, and/or to strengthen the parent-child relationship and enhance parental skills. The need for a supervised visit may be determined by assessing safety through a conversation with the parent, child and relatives to determine the safety needs for visitation. Foster parents do not determine if a visit is supervised. The safety assessment must identify immediate safety and well-being issues that require supervised visitation of the child as part of the agency's recommendations to the court. When the assessment of safety determines that supervision is needed, the agency provides that information to the court. The court determines reasonable rules for supervised and unsupervised visitation ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.178, subd. 3](#) and [Minnesota Statutes 260C.201, subd. 5](#)).

Visitation should occur in the most natural and least restrictive setting for a child and their family, while still maintaining a child's physical and emotional safety. Utilizing settings that a child is familiar with can reduce the stress and/or discomfort an unfamiliar location can have.

Relatives have the opportunity to participate in care and planning for a child, including supervising visits ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.221 subd. 3](#)). Agencies should engage relatives who can provide support and assist

with supervision of visitation. Expectations of the relative and parent should be clearly documented in the visitation plan.

Through assessments, caseworkers identify safety concerns that exist if a child is left unsupervised with their parent/s or other relatives. The assessment would consider the following:

- How old is the child?
- Are they able to talk about the visit and their needs?
- Are there concerns that the parent or relative may be physically or emotionally abusive to child or act in an inappropriate or unpredictable way?
- Is the child visiting with a perpetrator or person of concern?
- What is the emotional reaction of child?
- Is the child afraid to be alone with their parent or relative?
- Has the parent or relative been known to make statements or promises that negatively impact the child?
- Is supervised visitation a tool to model positive parenting behavior or facilitate interaction between the parent and child?

If an agency recommends to the court that visits be supervised, the visitation plan in the out-of-home placement plan will include a summary statement of the assessed safety reasons supervision is necessary. Plans for supervising visits should be individualized and document the association to safety factors and goals of the out-of-home placement plan. The caseworker should meet with the parent/s and the child/youth separately to provide a shared understanding about the reasons visits are supervised and the conditions and arrangements of the visitation plan.

First visit and frequency of visitation

The primary purpose of visitation is to maintain and develop a child's attachment with their parents. Secure and stable attachments are the foundation of a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. Children, parent/s and siblings should have contact as soon as possible after placement and continue to do so as frequently as possible based on the children's age, development and permanency goal.

Best practice is to arrange the first visit as soon as possible after removal. Though this may be difficult to complete due to various factors, including safety reasons, it is important for a child's well-being.

Infants and toddlers

It's critical for infants and toddlers to have frequent, consistent physical contact with their parents. Physical, in-person contact with familiar people is a primary way very young children communicate their needs and experience the felt sense of safety and love that helps them understand the world around them.

Frequency: Daily visitation is ideal, while visitation every two or three days should be a minimum.

Placement decisions need to consider proximity to the parent/s to allow for frequent visitation without extensive travel time, which will be very difficult for a young child. Relatives and non-relative foster parents of infants and toddlers need to understand and acknowledge the importance of the parent-child attachment at the early stages of child development and the important support foster parents can offer parent/s to help strengthen the parent-child relationship.

The caseworker develops a plan to maintain connections and relationships in the out-of-home placement plan that prioritizes the importance of frequent, meaningful visitation. The plan should ensure the activities promote attachment through physical contact, play, and routines. Parents may need support in developing daily caregiving routines or understanding the expectations for them to be part of the child's day-to-day care activities and the significance of these activities in a child's overall development. Parents should also be included in daily care outside of visitation to help them develop, maintain or strengthen their skills in the daily management of parenting tasks. Examples would include providing food, snacks, bottles or diapers for the visit and the toys or activities for interaction with the child.

The out-of-home placement plan may include the training and support the relative/s or non-relative foster parent/s may need to further understand the importance of this stage of development, the parent-child relationship and the foster parents' role in supporting visitation.

School-aged children

To develop and maintain secure attachment, school age children need to develop trust that their parents are available, responsive and protective caregivers. Unlike younger children, they're more able to use language to help them understand, communicate and cope with separation ([Kelly & Lamb, 2000](#)).

Frequency: School-aged children benefit from face-to-face contact two to three times a week and can use the phone, e-mail and other forms of contact to communicate with their parents.

Parents and relatives should be informed and encouraged to attend the child's activities. The responsible social services agency may consider how the foster parents can share this information during the scheduled visitation or other communication arrangements.

Youth/young adults

Youth should have regular visitation and contact with parent/s, siblings and other important family members.

Frequency: The frequency of visitation should be individually assessed, and the youth should be involved in the development of their case plan, including the plan for visitation.

Adolescent development involves becoming emotionally and psychologically prepared to separate from family and form an individual identity. Adolescent development can include youth spending less time or having more conflict with their families. Youth who have been removed from the parental home before they are emotionally prepared for separation complicates this developmental task. Regular visitation is still needed, as youth should

not lose their opportunity for a normal adolescence where they're allowed to individuate on their own time and in their own way.

This age group is more likely to have school, social or community activities that are important to them and function as a coping strategy to create a sense of normalcy. They may resent visitation plans being made that conflict with their other activities without their knowledge, and this highlights the importance of engaging with youth in the visitation plan ([Charles & Nelson, 2000](#)).

For youth aging out of foster care, increased visitation with their family is key to determining which family members will be a supportive resource to them when they leave care. As adults, youth will continue to have a relationship with family members but will no longer have the supportive structure of professionals around them to help them process these experiences. Increased visitation while these supports are still in place can help them practice the skills, knowledge and boundaries they'll need with their family later in life.

Sibling visitation

A child placed in foster care who has siblings in care has the right to be placed in the same foster home as their siblings, whenever possible, unless it is not in their best interest or safety ([Foster Care Sibling Bill of Rights](#)). Similarly, the current caregivers for siblings not in foster care need to be contacted as part of a relative search and considered for possible placement of the child ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.221, subd. 1\(a\)](#), [Minnesota Statutes 260C.212, subd. 2\(a\)\(1\)](#)).

Frequency: If siblings cannot be placed together, they have a right to have frequent and meaningful contact with each other. Contact should be maintained on a regular schedule and occur more than twice a month, but frequency may vary depending on age.

A sibling visitation plan must be included in the out-of-home placement plan. This visitation can be in the form of regular face-to-face visits; however, other forms of contact can include telephone, text message, social media and video calls. Sibling visits can occur in conjunction with parental visitation; however, if parental visits are suspended or terminated, this does not end regular sibling visitation.

Establishing and maintaining relationships with all siblings is important. Responsible social services agency caseworkers are to provide special consideration to ensure that contact with all siblings not in foster care occurs. This includes adult siblings and/or siblings living with other relatives.

Relatives, even if they have not been able to be a placement resource, can be important partners in developing and implementing a sibling visitation plan. Relatives can assist with visitation (including supervising visits), driving children to visits, or helping them to attend family functions or celebrations.

Other strategies include:

- Educating foster and adoptive parents on the importance of sibling relationships and how to actively facilitate a sibling relationship by helping to maintain contact
- Arranging overnight visitation or respite for the child in the sibling's home

- Scheduling joint therapy sessions
- Using FaceTime or other virtual options to maintain regular contact
- Sharing vacations
- Sharing childcare providers or babysitters
- Taking regular sibling group pictures
- Making life books together
- Acknowledging and celebrating each sibling's birthday.

Sibling visits may only be restricted if it is documented that the visit is contrary to the safety or well-being of any sibling ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.008 subd.1](#)). When it has been determined that sibling visits are contrary to the safety or well-being of the child, this determination is to be reviewed when the out-of-home placement plan is updated.

Relative visitation

Minnesota's definition of relatives for a child in placement includes:

- Persons related to the child by blood, marriage or adoption
- The legal parent, guardian or custodian of the child's siblings, or
- An individual who is an important friend of the child or of the child's parent or custodian, including an individual with whom the child has resided or had significant contact or who has a significant relationship to the child's parent or custodian. ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.007, subd. 27](#))

For children eligible for the protections of the [Indian Child Welfare Act](#), the definition of relatives also includes extended family members as defined by the law or custom of the Indian child's Tribe. In the absence of such law or custom, a relative is a person who has reached the age of 18 and who is the Indian child's grandparent, aunt, uncle, brother or sister, brother-in-law or sister-in-law, niece or nephew, first or second cousin, or stepparent.

Engaging the child, their parents and relatives to create a genogram or eco-map may be a helpful strategy to identify a child's significant relationships. A comprehensive family assessment is necessary to identify individuals with whom a child has an established and significant relationship. These relationships are considered significant because their loss could cause substantial harm to a child; preserving them is in the best interest of a child.

As outlined in [Minnesota Statutes 260C.221](#), caseworkers are to consider how family members can be involved in supporting and enhancing the parent-child relationship in order to preserve a child's connections. This can include considering how family members can be involved to increase the frequency of visitation, help with transportation, involve a child in cultural events or provide the foster parents with respite.

Out-of-state visitation

When a child or parent is out of state, the agency is to establish regular visitation. This includes engaging parents who may not have had frequent contact with the child before placement occurred. Visitation plans may look

different for these families but should incorporate face-to-face visits when possible and a variety of other methods like phone, video calls, etc.

Visits with an incarcerated parent

When a child's parent/s is/are incarcerated, special arrangements and efforts are necessary to maintain relationships and ensure regular visitation. A child's fears about a parent's incarceration may be more frightening than reality, so a visit can reassure a child that their parent/s are OK. If the parent's incarceration was related to child abuse, the impact of parental contact on the child will need to be assessed; a therapist's assessment and recommendations may be necessary before implementation of the visitation plan.

Visitation planning may include contacting the prison or jail to understand the visitation procedures and arrangements. A child should be prepared for the contact they will have with their incarcerated parent. Consider how information about the facility can be shared with the child. A child should know if they will see their parent in a small room or in a large room with other incarcerated individuals and their families, and if they will be able to hug their parent. A child should also know the facility's rules about gifts or mail. (Hess & Proch, 1988)

In addition to in-person visits with incarcerated parent/s, it is important to encourage other ways for children to feel valued and loved by their parent. Caseworkers can support connections by encouraging the parent and child to exchange letters, drawings and photographs, if allowed by the facility. See Casey Family Programs' [guidance on parental incarceration visits](#).

The [Minnesota Department of Corrections](#) has information on its website to help caseworkers or caregivers prepare a child for visiting a parent who is incarcerated. Federal prison information is available on the [Federal Bureau of Prisons website](#).

Visits with children in congregate care

Congregate care facilities include children's residential treatment programs, group homes and child foster residence settings. When a child is placed in a congregate care setting, the responsible social service caseworker engages with the child, child's parents, child's Tribe (if applicable) and others to develop the child's out-of-home placement plan, including the visitation and communication plan ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.212, subd. 1, \(c\)](#)). Facilities must follow the case plan developed by the placing agency, including the visitation and communication plan ([Minnesota Rules 2960.0070, subp. 5, E](#), [Minnesota Rules 2960.3080, subp. 5, B](#)). If a case plan has not been developed, the facility staff must work with the responsible social service case manager and the child's parents to jointly develop a plan. The responsible social services agency is required to develop an individual visitation plan that is consistent with the goals of placement and maintains the child-family relationships. Minnesota Rules state that:

- A child in a residential facility has the right to reasonable communication and visitation with adults outside the facility, which may include parent/s, extended family members, siblings, legal guardian/s,

caseworker, attorney, therapist, physician, religious advisor and case manager in accordance with the resident's case plan ([Minnesota Rules 2960.0050, subpart 1, J](#)).

- A licensed facility must not subject residents to withholding of basic needs, including, but not limited to, a nutritious diet, drinking water, clothing, hygiene facilities, normal sleeping conditions, proper lighting, educational services, exercise activities, ventilation and proper temperature, mail, family visits, positive reinforcement, nurturing or medical care ([Minnesota Rules 2960.0080, subp. 5, A, \(4\)](#)).
- A licensed facility may not restrict the visiting rights of parent/s of a resident beyond the limitations placed on those rights by a court order under [Minnesota Statutes 260C.201, subd. 5](#) or limitations in the resident's out-of-home placement plan. Visiting policies must allow parental visits at times that accommodate the parents' schedule ([Minnesota Rules 2960.0080, subpart 15, B](#)).

Visitation considerations in cases of domestic or sexual abuse

When children are placed in foster care from homes where domestic violence has occurred, the impact of family violence and other forms of abuse will require an assessment of the situation to consider a child's experiences, trauma and the impact on them. A child's experiences may differ significantly from an adult's experience. Assess the situation to identify safety issues and any measures needed to arrange for safe visits that will address the child's needs. This could include considerations for drop-off and pick-up locations, as well as a safety plan.

In sexual abuse cases, caseworkers must assess safety issues, as well as the child and parent's readiness for visitation, including therapist recommendations and evaluations as part of the assessment. The court may also set rules and boundaries about contact.

Visitation plan

The responsible social services agency caseworkers have the primary responsibility to ensure that a visitation plan is developed, implemented and revised as needed. The plan may be developed jointly by the caseworker and the parent/s, in consultation with a child's guardian ad litem; foster parent/s or representative of a residential facility; Tribe, if an Indian child; and child ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.178, subd. 7](#) and [Minnesota Statutes 260C.212, subd. 1](#)). Visitation must be consistent with the best interest of a child while they are in foster care ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.212, subd. 1\(c\)](#)).

Minnesota policy requires parent and sibling visits be considered as part of the emergency removal hearing that occurs within 72 hours of an involuntary placement ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.178, subd. 1 and 3](#)).

The court reviews and either modifies or approves the agency's plan for supervised and unsupervised visitation that contributes to the objectives of the court ordered case plan, as well as maintains family connections and relationships. No parent may be denied visitation unless the court finds that visitation would endanger a child's physical or emotional well-being ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.201, subd. 5](#)).

The visitation plan is guided by thorough and ongoing assessments of the parent's ability to safely care for and interact with their child/ren. The plan may require parent/s to meet certain conditions related to visits, such as

modifying behaviors that contributed to a child's removal. It is appropriate to determine conditions to protect the safety and well-being of children. Visits must not be used as punishment or reward for a child. Increased or reduced visitation should be related to an assessment of safety, and not linked to other measurements (Hess & Prosch, 1988).

A fixed visitation schedule is best practice and has been related to more frequent visitation and fewer missed visits; however, caseworkers are to make sure to update the plan if a schedule change is needed.

Visitation is a purposeful, planned activity that will have positive effects on a child's need for safety, well-being and permanency. The visitation plan:

- Respects and considers a child's existing bonds and attachments or establishes new connections
- Includes parent/s, siblings and other relatives or kin who are significant to a child
- Promotes the family's individual strengths
- Provides continuity of family relationships
- Involves the parent/s, child and foster family in the development and ongoing assessment of the plan
- Involves the family's support system
- Arranges visitation in the most home-like setting that will maintain a child's safety and existing attachments
- Connects a child's safety to the level of supervision
- Considers a child's daily schedule and the parent's work and/or treatment obligations
- Ensures that visitation frequency and settings are consistent and develop progressively towards a permanency goal
- Respects the family's culture, faith and rituals
- Ensures that parent/s assist in daily decision-making and participate in everyday activities as much as possible
- Increases contact and parent's role towards reunification or, when a child cannot return to parent's care, continues family relationships that preserve family and community connections.

The plan must include face-to-face visitation and may consider a variety of additional forms of contact between family members, including video calls, phone calls, emails, instant messaging, text messages, exchanging photographs, letters or cards, and attending school conferences, medical appointments, child's activities or community resources or events. If due to distance or safety reasons, face-to-face visitation is not part of the plan, the plan must identify the acceptable forms of contact.

Visits begin before the out-of-home placement plan is written and filed with the court. As a separate out-of-home placement plan is required for each child in care, this also includes a written visitation plan. The visitation plan is to include visitation with parent/s, guardian, siblings separated in placement and other relatives. Special consideration is given to adult siblings and siblings that are not in placement.

The content of the visitation plan includes:

- Persons who can visit a child or who can be present during visits, such as parents, siblings, grandparents, other relatives/kin
- Frequency of visitation
- Arrangements for monitoring or supervision of visits, if needed
- Location of visits
- Transportation arrangements
- Date the plan will be signed or revised.

A thorough visitation plan should consider the following:

- A connection between the plan goals and the purpose of visitation to the child's safety in language the parent/s can understand; for example, "Child may be emotionally harmed if unable to see or talk to their parent/s," or "Family visits are a time for parent/s and siblings to stay connected and play together without hurting each other"
- Itemized dates, visit length, and start and end times of visits
- Transportation arrangements for the visits
- Who is responsible for arranging the visits, if specific times are not set, including who will initiate the call for visits
- Exceptions for the visit, level of supervision, monitor's identity and role
- Approved visit activities, including specific tasks, such as diapering, feeding, providing toys or activities
- Identifying behaviors that will end the visit and reasons why these behaviors are considered a safety factor, including visit conditions, such as:
 - Specifying physical and verbal boundaries
 - Exchanging information such as notes, documents, gifts or toys
 - Calling in advance to confirm intention to miss a visit
 - Remaining sober throughout the visit
 - Refraining from using physical discipline
 - Refraining from bringing other persons to the visit without advance agency approval.
- Plans to manage likely problems with visitation
- Procedures for canceling a visit
- Plans for handling emergency situations, and a list of persons prohibited from visiting
- Plans for other forms of contact between family members including:
 - Outlining the conditions for phone calls, letters, e-mails, texts and video calls
 - Exchanging photographs and/or videos
 - Assessing the need to monitor the method or content of contacts.
- Methods to address sibling interactions when parent/s are visiting
- When siblings are in separate placements, plans to ensure sibling visitation continues even if parental visitation does not
- A list of agency services to support visitation.

Example of visitation plan

In this example, Family Group Decision Making was used to develop the plan. Susie is placed with her grandmother. Grandmother, Uncle Bill and the caseworker have agreed to work in partnership to support the parents.

The permanency goal is to return Susie to her parents' home and care. The purpose of visitation is to keep Susie attached to her mother and father while she is in foster care prior to reunification.

Grandmother will drive Susie to her parents' home to visit on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 4 p.m. and pick her up at 5:30 p.m. Grandmother will bring diapers and a change of clothes.

When grandmother drops Susie off, she will go into the apartment. Grandmother will leave Susie in parents' care if they are prepared for a visit. Grandmother will know they are prepared because they appear sober and have no other visitors in their home. Grandmother will not leave Susie in their care if they are not ready for a visit. Grandmother will know they are not ready if there is any other person in the apartment, or if the parents appear to be under the influence of a substance. Grandmother can recognize the following as signs that they may be under the influence: slurred speech, smell of alcohol or marijuana, loss of coordination, excessive drowsiness, etc.

Parents will not spank or hit Susie during a visit. Grandmother will help parents learn how to play with their child, redirect Susie's attention and use age-appropriate time-outs when needed. Parents will show the grandmother new information they are learning from their meetings with the parenting coach. Parents will offer Susie dinner.

If the grandmother believes at any time that it is not safe for Susie to be in her parents' care, she should leave the apartment with Susie. If the grandmother ends the visit for any reason, she will call the caseworker at her office phone number (651-222-xxxx). The caseworker will call the grandmother back the next business day to talk about the visit. The caseworker agrees to meet with the parents after any visit ends early.

Jack Smith, the in-home therapist, will participate in and monitor the visits on Wednesdays.

Susie and her mom will attend the mom-and-baby swim class on Tuesday mornings from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. at the community center. Uncle Bill will drive Susie to the class, meet Mom in the lobby and return her to the grandmother's care.

If a visit needs to be canceled, the person canceling will notify the parents and the caseworker by phone. Grandmother agrees to call the caseworker immediately to report that a visit was ended or canceled due to safety concerns.

When Susie needs to see the doctor for routine care, the parents are responsible for making the appointment and notifying the grandmother and the agency. If in need of an immediate appointment, the grandmother will make the appointment and notify the parents and the agency. Grandmother or Uncle Bill will drive Susie to

the doctor and meet the parents in the lobby. If parents need a ride, they agree to call the grandmother or Uncle Bill.

The caseworker will review the plan with the parents and grandmother once a week either by phone or during a face-to-face visit.

Parents, grandmother, Uncle Bill and the caseworker developed this plan for visitation. If the grandmother needs help with any part of this plan, she will call Uncle Bill and the caseworker or agency. The after-hours help line is (651) 222-xxxx.

The visitation schedule is developed with the parent/s, foster parent/s or representative of a residential facility, child (if appropriate) and caseworker. The following are practices that promote involvement in developing a visitation plan.

- An initial meeting is an opportunity for parent/s and foster parent/s to meet, ask questions, share information about a child and schedule future visits. This meeting may be organized by the responsible social services agency staff within two to seven days of placement. This meeting promotes communication about the child's well-being and initiates a relationship between the parent/s and foster parent/s to support a child's safety, permanency and well-being outcomes. It is vital that they meet right away if a child is under age 6, or before visitation takes place.
- Family Group Decision Making conferences bring together family and their support system, as well as relevant service providers, to share information and resources available for the family to develop a visitation plan. Family case-planning conferences can be utilized quickly to facilitate discussion about the case plan and decide next steps. The family is a child's enduring source of relationships, and the preservation of safe connections and attachments is paramount to their development.

Achieving safety, permanency and well-being outcomes requires caseworkers to understand the importance of maintaining connections and relationships and commit to the process. A written plan reassures a child and their parent/s that the agency is invested in maintaining family relationships. *Research indicates a strong relationship between the development of a visitation plan and actual visitation by parents.* Caseworkers' attitudes and behaviors that encourage visitation have a positive influence on parental visitation (Center for Advanced Studies on Child Welfare, 1997).

Parent/s may miss visits without providing notice, make unrealistic promises or exhibit destructive behaviors during the visit. If this happens, the following should be considered:

- A parent's absence from a scheduled visit will be less disruptive to a child if the visit can be planned within the normal daily activities for the child or in another familiar setting.
- Visits can be held in the home of a relative, where a child can visit with extended family or friends, even if the parent/s does/do not attend.
- Regular communication between the parent/s, foster parent/s, caseworker and other appropriate persons can address visitation plans and frequent absence issues.

Review and revision of visitation plan

The out-of-home placement plan, which includes the visitation plan, must be reviewed and modified any time a child's placement changes and every six months until they return home or an alternative permanency plan is finalized. The review takes place in an administrative review meeting or in a court review hearing. The out-of-home placement plan is revised to reflect progress, needed changes and updates. Caseworkers consult with their agency supervisors to determine when a plan should be revised and signed.

It is important for caseworkers to view visitation as a process that preserves and enhances family connections.

Court review

As required under court review of foster care, the court shall review the out-of-home placement plan (OHPP) and the child's placement at least every 90 days as required in juvenile court rules to determine whether continued out-of-home placement is necessary and appropriate or whether the child should be returned home ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.202](#)). The OHPP includes a section on child-parent visitation and is a part of the court review. Visitation is in the required court report. A court report template is available in SSIS and [DHS-8248](#). Agencies using their own templates should include a section on maintaining connections and relationships.

The parents and relatives have a right to be heard during a hearing about their visitation ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.163, subd. 2\(b\)](#)).

Terminating or limiting visitation

No parent may be denied visitation unless the court finds that visitation would endanger the child's physical or emotional well-being ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.201, subd.5](#)).

The absence of regular, frequent visitation may have serious consequences for children, siblings and parent/s. Changes in visitation should be directly related to ongoing safety concerns within a continuous assessment process. Continue to develop visitation arrangements openly and as part of the out-of-home placement plan with family participation.

Foster parents' role in visitation

Foster parents are essential partners in maintaining connections between children and their parent/s, siblings or other relatives and must follow the visitation and communication plan outlined in the out-of-home placement plan. They may not limit or restrict family visitation and communication beyond what is outlined in the plan. In the absence of a case plan regarding visitation, the foster parent must work with the placing agency and the child's parents to develop a visitation plan ([Minnesota Rules 2960.3080, subp.7, subp. 8\(A\)4, and subp.9](#)).

Both relative and non-relative foster parents licensed through a county or Department of Humans Services-authorized licensing agency must agree to and comply with the requirements listed in the [Agreement between](#)

[Foster Parents and Child Foster Care Licensing Agency](#) (DHS-0139). Some of the responsibilities outlined in the agreement can be considered by the caseworker when drafting a visitation plan.

Additional best practice recommendations for foster parents include:

- Be actively involved in visits, model healthy parent-child interaction or share information agreed to in the out-of-home placement plan.
- Provide emotional support to the child, even when contact with parent/s and siblings is disruptive or confusing to a child.
- Document a child's behavior after visits as requested by the caseworker.
- Have children ready for each contact, including supporting the visit with necessary supplies, such as diapers, special food or clothes.
- Consider ways to prepare a child for visits and share information about their daily life, such as sending recent information from the school, school projects or pictures of their child.
- Ensure that parent/s is/are aware of their child's activities, appointments and school events, and promote inclusion of the child's activities as part of the visitation plan; when a parent cannot attend activities, provide pictures and updates.
- Provide transportation as agreed to in the out-of-home placement plan.
- Comfort and reassure the child in ways that are helpful following a visit, such as encouraging them to be open about expressing their feelings.
- Be flexible in scheduling visitation so that a child can have the maximum amount of contact; when face-to-face visits are not possible, plan with the caseworker how to accommodate with telephone calls, video calls, text messages, email or other options so parent/s and child/ren can maintain frequent contact.
- Notify the caseworker of any unplanned contact between a child and parent/s or between foster parent/s and parent/s.
- Talk positively about parent/s to the child and to others.
- Discuss reactions to visit arrangements with the caseworker, not the child or parent/s.
- Ensure that children have pictures of their parent/s, siblings and other important people and a way to display them; if a child does not have pictures, ask the parent/s or caseworker for them.
- Be curious about a child's cultural and family practices, as this information can be helpful to support visitation; for example, knowing that the mother and the child/ren enjoy card games, celebrate Kwanza, make egg rolls together, attend local baseball games or pick strawberries in the spring. Every family has their own practices that are often connected to their culture and family history. Obtaining this information can be significant in promoting frequent visitation, supporting reunification and preserving a child's cultural and community connections.

Relative foster parents may have had a previous relationship with the child and parent/s, and their visitation role may need additional supports and considerations. Relative and kinship caregivers may be especially challenged when a child is upset after visits. They may also need extra support from caseworkers or other family members in understanding the challenges of loyalty issues, the importance of the visitation plan, and maintaining appropriate boundaries. The caseworker's role as a liaison between the relative/kinship caregiver and parent/s

is key in promoting communication, encouraging understanding between parties and preserving placement stability.

Understanding reactions and supporting visitation with the child, parent/s and foster parent/s

Supporting visitation is an important aspect of case planning that continues to encourage connections and relationships while facilitating children's adjustment to placement. One way to support visitation when children enter foster care or move to a new placement is for agency workers to coordinate initial calls between foster parents/facility staff and the child's parents/legal guardian. Agency staff should attempt to coordinate the initial call as soon as practical after a child arrives at their placement but no later than 72 hours after placement. Whenever possible, make the initial call immediately at the time of placement ([Minnesota Statutes 260C.219, subd. 6](#)). For more detailed information on initial foster care phone calls, see [Initial foster care phone calls: Practice guide for social service agencies](#) (DHS-7295A) and/or [Initial foster care phone calls: Information for parents, foster parents, and facility staff](#) (DHS-7295B).

Child

Some children will feel happy and excited about visits with their parent/s, but for children of any age, there may be times when they become upset prior, during or after a visit. This may be due to a child's:

- Normal feelings of loss and separation reactivated by seeing the parent/s, which can affect the child's mood, coping abilities, and behavior
- Anxiety and fear when visiting with their parent/s; their time together may be very stressful
- Conflict in loyalty and feeling a need to reject the foster parent/s when returning to the foster home to affirm their love for their parent/s
- Loss or lack of control
- Thinking that it is their fault they cannot go home
- Confusion about why they cannot go home
- Inability to talk about confusion or fears
- Defensiveness when feeling that their parent/s are being criticized
- Behavior regressions such as whining, nightmares, bedwetting, aggression, inability to listen and/or complaints of physical pain before and/or after visits.

When visitation is consistently causing a child distress, the caseworker should assess their needs and discuss them with the parent/s and foster parents. The following may be considerations:

- If a child becomes upset due to feelings of separation or loss, the caseworker could consider increasing the frequency and duration of visits.

- If a child is anxious because they are not comfortable with their parent/s, the caseworker could consider increasing contact, changing location to a safe or fun place or including a support person identified by the child to ease their concern.
- If a child's behavior appears to be related to attachment issues, the caseworker could consider involving a parent coach or therapist to assist parent/s in improving the parent-child relationship.
- If loyalty conflicts contribute to a child's distress, the caseworker could reassure them that it is OK to like or care for both their family and their foster family. The caseworker should request that the foster family and parent/s help to reassure the child.
- If a child appears to be fearful or reserved, or too quiet during a visit, the worker should consider encouraging them to talk about their concerns, reassure them that the worker will support them and develop a plan to support their emotional needs during and after visits.

Parent/s

Regardless of why a child is in placement, parent/s may feel pain, anger and/or fear of losing custody of their child. Parents may show these feelings by:

- Trying to cope by engaging in visitation activities that show affection and concern for their children
- Competing for their children's loyalty by making unrealistic promises or undermining the foster parents
- Reacting to lack of control by requiring certain locations or activities
- Becoming anxious about visits and overcompensating by bringing numerous gifts or making numerous calls to the foster parents
- Using alcohol or drugs before a visit
- Canceling or not showing up for visits.

When parent/s are absent from visits or behaving in a manner that is disruptive or causes a child distress, the caseworker should assess the parent's individual needs and consider the following:

- If parent/s engage in competitive behavior for a child's loyalty, the caseworker should promote the parent-child relationship to ensure that the parent/s are involved in their child's daily care and decision-making. The caseworker could consider a plan for regular communication between the foster parents and parent/s to ensure that they are consistently involved in their child's care.
- If parent/s use alcohol or drugs before a visit, the caseworker should consider involving or increasing the involvement of the Alcohol or Other Drug (AOD) treatment or aftercare professionals to support visitation.
- If parent/s is/are anxious, they may not know what is expected at visits or how to interact with their child. The caseworker could consider meeting with parent/s before visits to help plan and coach them through the expectations of the visit. Parent/s may also need additional services to assist them in learning new skills.
- If parent/s is/are absent from visits, the caseworker may consider additional assessments to determine the parent's needs and how to support their individual strengths.

Foster parent/s

Regardless of why children have been removed from their parent's care and placed in foster care, parents and children will have feelings and emotional reactions about the separation. Foster parents enter a relationship with the parent/s and the children and will need assistance to understand and evaluate their role in visitation. Caseworkers may consider:

- Do foster parents acknowledge the importance of the parent-child relationship, and are they pleased when a child is comforted by visits with the parent/s and family members?
- Are foster parents able to see that foster care is temporary and facilitates permanency, which includes reunification?
- Do foster parents understand separation/grief and resist blaming parent/s for a child's emotional or behavioral reactions?
- Are foster parents resentful of disruptions that visitation causes in the family routine and having to deal with a child's reactions?
- Do foster parents make efforts to engage parent/s in the day-to-day care of their child?
- Do foster parents ensure that parent/s are aware of the child's school or other activities as directed by the out-of-home placement plan?

When the foster parents' reactions to visitation do not support permanency goals, the caseworker should assess these reactions to get a better understanding of their goals. If foster parents express a different understanding of their role or lack of knowledge about separation, loss or attachment issues, the caseworker could ensure that they receive training to address this need. The caseworker could also consider facilitating meetings between foster parents and parent/s to assist in relationship-building.

Foster parents may feel resentful of disruptions visitation causes in their family life or a child's reactions. Caseworkers should consider further assessment to understand the child and family's daily schedule and the child's reactions. The child or the foster parents may need additional supports to cope with visitation.

If foster parents express concern that a child is not attaching to their family, caseworkers should consider the following as it relates to the placement:

- The permanency goal
- The use of concurrent planning
- The role of the foster family
- The length of placement
 - For new placements, foster parents may need training about separation and the importance of visitation for a child's well-being. If a child has been with the foster family for several months and parent/s are not making progress towards reunification, the foster parents may start to connect to the child and feel the need to provide stability and permanency. If this is the case, services and supports available to concurrent resource families should be considered.

If the foster family is not making efforts to engage parent/s in daily care or well-being appointments, the worker should consider whether foster parents are aware of their role and clarify their role in writing as part of the out-of-home placement plan.

If foster parents are relatives, the worker needs to consider the family relationships and make efforts to promote stability and support for the family within the family system. The worker should also consider formal system supports to ensure that the relative foster family is receiving training and services typically made available to unrelated foster parents.

Visits can be complex. Everyone involved in the visit has different goals, agendas, expectations and needs. Caseworkers must understand and manage each of these while keeping the focus on the child/ren and their permanency. Foster parents may use the [Resource Family and Caseworker Visit Discussion Tool](#) (DHS-7889) as a way to improve their information sharing regarding the needs and services for the foster parent and child or youth in care.

Health and wellness considerations for family visitation

Although visitation is important between parent/s and children in foster care, there should be considerations regarding the health and wellness of either party to participate in a visit. If either party has symptoms like a fever of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, cough, sore throat, vomiting or diarrhea, consider staying home from a visit.

These practices improve cleanliness and may help lower the risk of respiratory viruses.

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze; if you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your elbow, not your hands.
- Learn and utilize proper hand-washing techniques.
- Teach children the correct way to wash their hands.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces regularly.

Engage parents when their child is sick by informing them of their child's illness and providing frequent updates. Make accommodations to include parents in a child's medical appointments, virtually or in person if possible. For additional guidance, reference the [Parent-Child Visitation Guidance for COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (DHS-7398).

SSIS documentation

Visitation plans should be documented in the out-of-home placement plan and updated as any changes are needed. In addition, caseworkers can utilize SSIS case notes to document visit dates, observations and additional details. For information regarding documentation in SSIS, refer to the [Social Service Information System \(SSIS\) Resource Page](#).

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[How can child protection agencies support children spending time with their parents who are incarcerated, 2023](#)

Resources

Lummi Child Welfare Comprehensive Guide to Active Efforts [Comprehensive-Guide-to-Active-Efforts-Lummi-Nation-Published-3-26-21.pdf \(wacita.org\)](#)