

POLICY VI-C: MAINTAINING FAMILY TIES IN OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENTS

01/2016

Removal from the home and subsequent out-of-home placement are traumatic events for children. One way this trauma may be minimized is by maintaining family ties in out-of-home placements. Moreover, the Division believes that strengths of families and supporting these strengths contribute to life-long permanent relationships for children. This belief is supported by research demonstrating that children who maintain positive family ties while in out-of-home placement achieve better short- and long-term outcomes. If court orders differ from the requirements outlined in this policy and related procedures regarding visits and contact with family members, the Division will comply with court orders accordingly.

CONTACT WITH PARENTS

In order to maintain and strengthen the parent-child relationship, visits and other forms of contact with parents and their children in out-of-home placements are essential. Visits between parents, including noncustodial and putative parents, and their children will occur at least weekly based upon the child's best interest. More frequent visits are encouraged, as appropriate. A positive drug or alcohol screen in and of itself will not result in the postponement and/or withholding of visits between a parent and child in DHS custody unless:

- A. The parent is under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol at the time of the scheduled visit and has observable behavior indicating impairment of parenting capacity; or,**
- B. A court order specifies that a parent's positive screen will result in the withholding of parent-child visits.**

Visits may be supervised or unsupervised depending on the dynamics of the case. Any Division staff member as well as approved student interns and volunteers may supervise visits. However, the appropriate supervisor will individualize each assignment to supervise visits. When making the assignment the supervisor will consider the family's history, current level of functioning, and any other applicable factors as well as the skill set of the individual selected to supervise the visit.

The preferred location for visits is the parent's home or, if that is not possible, in the most home-like setting possible. Office visits are a last resort.

While children are in out-of-home placements, the Division, in conjunction with foster parents and placement providers, will update parents regarding their children's lives including providing information regarding, without limitation, status of physical, behavioral, and emotional health, progress in school, involvement in extracurricular activities, and achievements. Parents will be invited to participate in their children's school, faith-based, and extracurricular activities as appropriate.

The specific plan for visits between a child in out-of-home placement and his or her parents as appropriate, will be included in the case plan. As the family prepares for reunification, the frequency and/or length of visits will increase while the level of supervision will decrease accordingly. The case plan will be updated as needed to reflect changes regarding visits and other contact.

Foster parents may communicate directly with biological parents when appropriate and in the child's best interest to give updates on the child's progress, inform them of the child's school and extracurricular activities, and share photos. In addition, since foster parents can model positive parenting skills that may help the biological parents to achieve reunification, foster parents may consider hosting parent-child visits, if appropriate and acceptable to all individuals involved. Foster parents are also encouraged to consider supporting the parent-child relationship in other ways such as helping the child write letters to his or her parents, creating Life Books with the children to then share with the biological parents, and presenting a positive view of the child's parents to the child to the extent possible.

When assessing the appropriateness of foster parents communicating directly with biological parents, holding parent-child visits in the foster parent home, and/or transporting the child to parent-child visits, the Division will ensure the foster parents thoroughly understand all court orders related to parent-child contact and consider:

- A. Various family dynamics;
- B. Progress of the case at that point in time; and,
- C. Experience and other skills sets of the foster family.

DCFS staff members will discuss with foster parents and biological parents the level of comfort that both sets of parents have with foster parents hosting/supervising parent-child visits and/or providing transportation to parent-child visits. Staff will not expect foster parents to host/supervise parent-child visits and/or transport to parent-child visits:

- A. During the first placement they have as foster parents;
- B. During the first month of any open foster care case regardless of the number of times they have served as foster parents.

Exceptions to the above guidelines may be made if the foster parents express an interest in assisting with parent-child visits under these conditions. Even when foster parents state they are willing to assist with parent-child visits during the first placement they have as foster parents or during the first month of any open foster care case, the FSW will make a decision regarding the foster parents' involvement with parent-child visits after carefully assessing each individual case and the dynamics involved.

Even after the first month of an open foster care case, if foster parents desire to assist with parent-child visits, the FSW will continue to assess on a case by case basis the appropriateness of foster parent involvement for each foster care placement. The Division will assist the foster parents and biological parents in establishing appropriate expectations and boundaries regarding communication and interaction (e.g., frequency and specific times the biological parent may call and/or visit the foster home). Any direct interaction between the biological parents and foster parents in no way relieves the Division of its duty to ensure the biological parents remain current on all aspects of their case and their children.

CONTACT WITH SIBLINGS

Sibling relationships are emotionally powerful and critically important not only in childhood, but over the course of a lifetime with sibling relationships likely to be the longest relationships most people experience. Siblings include those individuals who would be considered a sibling under state/tribal law if it were not for the disruption in parental rights, such as a termination of parental rights or death of a parent.

For children in out-of-home placements, sibling relationships can provide a significant source of continuity, stability, and comfort while in foster care. As such, when it is in the best interest of each of the children and barring extenuating circumstances, siblings are entitled to be placed together in out-of-home placements.

Siblings may be placed separately only if:

- A. Allegations of abuse between siblings are under investigation and/or have been founded;
 - 1) An assessment must be conducted by a mental health professional within five days of placing siblings in different placements due to the abuse allegations between the siblings that are under investigation and/or have been founded.
 - a) The siblings may continue in the separated placements if the assessment by the mental health professional supports continuing the separated placements because placing the siblings together would be detrimental to the health, safety, or well-being of one or more of the children as related to the abuse allegations and/or investigation findings;
- B. An assessment by a mental health professional determines that placing the siblings together would be detrimental to the health, safety, or well-being of one or more of the children; or,
- C. The Division presents evidence to the court that there are no available placements that can take the entire sibling group.

If children must be separated, the Division will attempt to place them in close proximity in order to facilitate regular and meaningful contact. The Division will ensure the reasons for the separation of siblings into different foster homes or other approved placements are regularly reassessed and targeted recruitment efforts continue to reunite the siblings. The case plan must include when siblings will be reassessed to determine if they can be reunited at a later point in time. If the reassessment determines reunification is appropriate, the plan for placing siblings together will be documented in the case plan as well.

In an effort to maintain sibling connections for those siblings who are placed separately, the siblings' case will be reviewed by the court at least once every 90 days to determine whether there have been reasonable efforts to reunite the siblings and to allow regular and meaningful contact with the siblings. If the court approves a paper review, the 90 day court reviews of separated siblings may be satisfied by such a review and a hearing is not required.

In addition, siblings who must be placed separately will have consistent and meaningful contact at least weekly when possible. While face-to-face visits in home-like settings or other family-friendly locations are preferred and encouraged, other forms of communication such as phone calls, emails, and Skype or FaceTime (or similar program) conversations are permissible, as age and developmentally appropriate, to meet the weekly contact requirement. However, siblings who are placed separately will have at least bi-weekly face-to-face visits unless a the FSW Supervisor grants a visit waiver. The plan for sibling visits and other contact will be outlined in the case plan. Visits or other forms of contact with siblings will not be withheld by DCFS or any placement provider as a behavioral consequence unless there are documented safety concerns for one or more of the siblings.

Siblings also have the right to remain actively involved in each other's lives. Aside from regularly scheduled visits, the Division, foster parents, and other placement providers will work together to allow siblings to share celebrations including birthdays, holidays, graduations, and other meaningful milestones when possible. The Division, foster parents, and other placement providers will also collaborate to ensure siblings attend each other's extracurricular events such as athletic events, musical performances, and faith-based events when reasonable and practical.

The Division will ensure siblings are included in one another's case plan staffing decisions and permanency planning decisions as age and developmentally appropriate. Siblings will also be notified when another sibling has a change in placement or exits foster care as age and developmentally appropriate. When a sibling leaves foster care, that sibling will be allowed, as appropriate, to maintain contact with a sibling who remains in an out-of-home placement. The Division will also strive to help children in foster care maintain relationships with their siblings who are not in out-of-home placements or who have been adopted or placed in permanent custody or guardianship.

CONTACT WITH RELATIVES AND OTHER FICTIVE KIN

In an effort to ensure foster care supports the permanency and well-being of the children in DHS custody, children may have an opportunity to visit or have other forms of contact with grandparents, great-grandparents, other relatives, and fictive kin provided the visits are in the best interest of the children. It is the responsibility of the Division to explore the willingness and appropriateness of identified relatives and fictive kin interested in being involved in the lives of children in out-of-home placements.

CONTACT AFTER TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS

If it is in the child's best interest, visits with relatives may continue after Termination of Parental Rights (TPR). Visits after TPR will continue until an adoptive placement is made or the out-of-home placement case is closed. The Division will encourage adoptive parents to consider allowing contact between biological relatives and fictive kin with their adopted children, as appropriate. Continuation of visits with relatives does not include the parents for whom the agency has obtained TPR.

PROCEDURE VI-C1: Parent-Child Contact for Children in Out-of-Home Placements

01/2016

The Family Service Worker will:

- A. Within five working days of placement, assess and determine the frequency and length of parent-child visits, to include non-custodial and putative parents as appropriate, in order to develop a visit plan to recommend to the court.
- B. Obtain approval from FSW Supervisor for any deviations from required frequency of visits.
 - 1) If approved, request appropriate visit waiver in CHRIS.
- C. Arrange for visits with parents as outlined in the case plan to include assisting with transportation, supervision of visits, and/or other logistics, as needed.
 - 1) This coordination may include asking Program Assistants (PAs), interns, and/or volunteers to assist with transports to and supervision of visits, as appropriate.
 - 2) The FSW will make sure any PAs, interns, and/or volunteers supervising parent-child visits:
 - a) Know the history and other applicable dynamics of the case; and,
 - b) Understand what they are to observe and/or assist with while providing said supervision.
- D. Prepare children for visits with their parents.
- E. Ask Program Assistants, interns, and/or volunteers, as applicable, for information he/she obtained while assisting with parent-child visits and/or review PA CHRIS contact entries, as applicable.
- F. Update the CANS and/or case plan as necessary based on the interaction and/or outcomes of parent-child visits.
- G. Conference with FSW Supervisor as necessary regarding parent-child visits.

The Family Service Worker Supervisor will:

- A. Review and approve the plan for visits and other contact with parents.
- B. Assist with parent-child visit logistics if needed.
- C. Conference regularly with the FSW and other staff who may supervise visits to assess the quality of the visits and to determine if any changes to the plan for visits and/or other contact are needed.

The Program Assistant will:

- A. Assist with transports to and/or supervision of parent-child visits as assigned.
- B. Share information gathered from transports to and supervision of parent-child visits with FSW and document information in CHRIS contact screens.

PROCEDURE VI-C2: Sibling Contact for Children in Out-of-Home Placements

01/2016

The Family Service Worker will:

- A. Include in the case plan the reasons for the separation, if applicable, as well as the steps that will be taken to reunify the siblings in a single placement, if appropriate.
 - 1) Arrange for an assessment by a mental health professional within five days to determine if placing the siblings together would be detrimental to the health, safety, or well-being of one or more of the siblings as needed.
- B. Within five working days of placement, assess and determine the frequency and length of sibling visits in order to develop a visit plan to recommend to the court.
- C. Obtain approval from the FSW Supervisor for any deviations from required frequency of visits.
 - 1) If approved, request appropriate visit waiver in CHRIS.

- D. Arrange for visits with siblings as outlined in the case plan as well as participation in sibling celebrations and attendance of sibling extracurricular events, to include assisting with transportation and/or other logistics, as needed.
 - 1) This coordination may include asking Program Assistants, interns, foster parents, and/or volunteers to assist with transports to and supervision of visits, as appropriate.
 - 2) Encourage foster parents to assist with siblings participating in one another's various celebrations and extracurricular activities.
- E. Prepare children for visits with their siblings.
- F. Ensure supervision of visits if needed.
- G. Document sibling visits and participation in sibling celebrations and extracurricular activities in CHRIS contact screens.
- H. Ask Program Assistant for information he/she obtained while assisting with sibling visits and other contact and/or review PA CHRIS contact entries, as applicable.
- I. Update the CANS and/or case plan as necessary based on the interaction and/or outcomes of sibling visits and other contacts.
- I. Conference with FSW Supervisor as necessary regarding sibling visits and other contacts.
- J. Document efforts to reunify siblings placed separately in CHRIS contacts screen.
- K. Document sibling visits that occur after TPR in CHRIS contacts screen.
- L. Prepare the packet for the 90 Day Court Review to include:
 - 1) 90 Day Case Review Cover Sheet
 - 2) The case plan participants and visitation plan sections of the case plan
 - 3) The Family Visit Log for the preceding 90 days listing only the sibling visits and/or parent visits that include all siblings as well (i.e., exclude visits involving only parents and one child)
 - 4) Printed CHRIS contact screens for the past 90 days regarding sibling visits, other sibling contact, and efforts to reunify siblings
- M. Submit the 90 Day Case Review Packet to the FSW Supervisor for review.
- N. Submit the 90 Day Case Review Packet to the local OCC attorney.

The Family Service Worker Supervisor will:

- A. Review and approve the plan for visits and other contact with siblings.
- B. Assist with sibling visit logistics if needed.
- C. Conference regularly with the FSW and other staff, interns, and/or volunteers, as applicable, involved with siblings visits to assess the quality of the visits and to determine if any changes to the plan for visits and/or other contact are needed.
- D. Review the 90 Day Court Review Packet and request any necessary changes.

The Program Assistant will:

- A. Assist with transports to and/or supervision of sibling visits as assigned.
- B. Share information gathered from transports to and supervision of sibling visits with FSW and document information in CHRIS contact screens.

PROCEDURE VI-C3: Other Relative and Fictive Kin-Child Contact in Out-of-Home Placement

01/2016

The Family Service Worker will:

- A. Assess and determine the frequency and length of contact with other relatives and fictive kin to recommend to the court.

- B. Arrange for contact with other relatives or fictive kin as outlined in the case plan to include assisting with transportation and/or other logistics, as needed.
 - 1) This coordination may include asking Program Assistants, interns, and/or volunteers to assist with transports to and supervision of visits, as appropriate.
- C. Prepare children for visits with other relatives and fictive kin.
- D. Ensure supervision of visits as needed.
- E. Update the CANS and/or case plan as necessary based on the interaction and/or outcomes of contact with other relatives and fictive kin.
- F. Conference with FSW Supervisor as necessary regarding contact with other relatives and fictive kin.

The Family Service Worker Supervisor will:

- A. Review and approve the plan for contact with other relatives and fictive kin.
- B. Assist with logistics of contact with other relatives and fictive kin if needed.
- C. Conference regularly with the FSW and other staff who may supervise visits with other relatives and fictive kin to assess the quality of the visits and to determine if any changes to the plan for visits and/or other contact are needed.

The Program Assistant will:

- A. Assist with logistics of contact with relatives and fictive kin as assigned.
- B. Share information gathered from interaction with children, other relatives, and fictive kin with FSW and document information in CHRIS contact screens.

POLICY VII-I: DIVISION CONTACT WITH CHILDREN IN OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENTS

01/2016

Regular, quality contact between the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and a child in an out-of-home placement can be one source of vital constancy for the child. Consistent contact not only provides some stability in the child's life, but also allows the Division to ensure the child's safety and well-being. As such, DCFS will have regular visits and other forms of contact with children in out-of-home placements.

The child's Family Service Worker (FSW) will visit the child in his/her approved out-of-home placement at least weekly during the first month of placement and at least weekly in any new placement thereafter. Visits after the first month in care or in a new placement will occur at least monthly in the approved out-of-home placement. During visits in the out-of-home placement, the FSW will engage the age-appropriate child in a private conversation to better assess the quality of care being provided.

In the event the FSW is unable to conduct these regular visits in the out-of-home placement, another FSW or the FSW Supervisor may make the visits in the place of the FSW to ensure the safety and well-being of the child and meet the regular visit requirement. However, these exceptions will be limited. While DCFS support staff (e.g., Program Assistants) may also visit the child in the out-of-home placement, the regular out-of-home placement visit requirement will not be considered met until an FSW or FSW Supervisor has conducted the regular out-of-home placement visit.

In addition to the visits in the child's out-of-home placement, the FSW will maintain weekly contact with the child through forums such as school, parent-child visits, during transportation to various appointments, family-centered staffings, court hearings, and/or via telephone or programs such as FaceTime and Skype. Additional contact each week with other Division staff such as Program Assistants or Division interns or volunteers via telephone, transports, etc. is appropriate, but will not replace the requirement for the child's FSW to maintain weekly contact with the child.

The purpose of these visits and other contact will be to:

- A. Provide the child with accurate information about his/her case at an age and developmentally appropriate level;
- B. Answer questions the child may have;
- C. Engage the child and foster parents, as appropriate, in activities geared to accomplish case plan goals and to assure the child's needs are being met;
- D. Assess the quality of the care being provided;
- E. Determine and monitor, through conversation and/or observation, the child's safety and the extent to which the child's developmental, medical, intellectual, and emotional needs are being met; and,
- F. Assess the child's adjustment to the out-of-home placement, foster parents, other persons in the home, and school.

PROCEDURE VII-I1: Supervision of Children in Out-of-Home Placement

01/2016

The Family Service Worker will:

- A. Regularly inform the child and placement provider when visits will take place (though unannounced visits are allowable when necessary).
 - 1) Keep all scheduled visit appointments or, if unable to do so, inform the child and/or provider about the cancellation and reschedule as soon as possible.

- B. Document visits with the child in his/her out-of-home placement on the contact screen with the “Face to Face Placement Provider” selected as the type and “Foster Child Weekly/Monthly” selected as the purpose.
- C. Document all other forms of contact with the child in CHRIS contact screens.
- D. Speak with any PA, secondary FSW, intern, and/or volunteer who has interacted with the child to gather information regarding those interactions and/or review CHRIS contacts entered by other Division staff.
- E. Conference with the FSW Supervisor about information collected during regular visits and other contact with the child.
- F. Update the CANS and/or case plan as appropriate based on visits and other contact with the child.

The FSW Supervisor will:

- A. Conference with the FSW regarding regular visits and other contact with the child.
- B. Conduct visits with the child in the out-of-home placement if needed.

The Program Assistant will:

- A. Share information gathered during their contact with children in out-of-home placements with the child’s FSW and the PA’s supervisor.
- B. Document contacts with children in out-of-home placements in CHRIS.