

HANDOUT 1: OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO CONNECTION WITH CHILD'S FAMILY

Children benefit from maintaining connections to their family while in foster care. Parent-child visitation plays a key role in children achieving permanency quickly. For the child's parents, visitation can be a strong motivator to complete the work they must do for their child's return. Conversely, when parents fail to visit, the court may move towards another permanency plan more quickly. It is not unusual for contact between foster parents and the child's parent's to be awkward at first. Try to put yourself in their shoes, imagining how you might feel if the situation was reversed. Expect the parents to be angry and uncomfortable. Try not to take this personally, rather reassure the parent your role is to care for their child until the child can return to their home.

COMMUNICATE BEFORE THE VISIT:

- Show the child that all adults are working together.
- Share any issues that might affect the visit or contact. For example, if the child has been sick or having difficulty in school.
- Does the parent have reliable transportation to visits? If not, anticipate this might impact the schedule of contacts.
- Discuss the setting for the visit. Will it be indoors or outdoors; are there other significant issues.
- Discuss if the family wants to bring something for the child.
- Share with the family anything you plan to bring, for example, snacks.

SET BOUNDARIES:

- Foster parents can gather information from parents that may inform their parenting and can gradually put the birth parent at ease. Treat them like they are the experts on their child.
- Maintain an empathetic stance with the child's family. If the child is in foster care, work with the child welfare agency to establish boundaries regarding contact and communication.
- If there is a problem, let the child's family know what the issue is and try to work it out.
- Boundaries may need to be set around circumstances such as sobriety, showing up, keeping to agreements and times that they can call the house, contact on social media, etc.
- Negative and destructive comments are not allowed. That includes any communication that seeks to shame, blame, or manipulate the child, other family members, foster parents, or agency staff.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE CHILD'S FAMILY

- Adopt a nonjudgmental approach when communicating with the family. The family will likely be cautious and untrusting during the initial contacts.
- Maintain open communications with the child's family, listening to their concerns and input about their child.
- Let the family know what is going on with the child. This will help avoid misunderstanding.
- Ask the parents about their child's likes, dislikes, habits, and fears
- Share information about the child's activities: School performance and conferences, doctor, dental or therapy visits



- Ask for a picture of the parents or other significant family members for the child's bedroom or ask for permission to take a picture at one of the visits.
- Show the parents pictures of the child's bedroom.
- When in-person contact cannot be reliable, arrange for other types of contact such as letters, phone calls, FaceTime, texts, etc. These can be monitored, if necessary.

KEEP THE CHILD'S FAMILY INFORMED:

- Keep a journal of activities that occur between visits to share with the family.
- Negotiate any change in the type and frequency of contact between visits. For example, can there be phone calls, and if so, what is the best time for the child?
- Be as flexible as possible if the time of visits or contacts need to change from time to time.

PREPARE THE CHILD FOR THE VISIT:

- Get a calendar and add the visit or contact schedule.
- Before the visit is to occur, talk about the visit and their expectations.
- Ask if the child wants to bring something to share – a project from school or artwork they have done.
- Expect behavior challenges from excitement about the upcoming visit, or anxiety if there have been past failed visits

DURING THE VISIT:

- Bring books or sketch pads and coloring pencils, games or toys for child and parent to engage
- Ask older children what they'd like to do during the visit with their family

AFTER THE VISIT:

- Talk to the child about the visit building on the positive.
- Engage the child or youth in a stress reducing activity: Walking, running, basketball, music, etc.
- Visits are often stressful for foster parents. To help de-stress, plan an activity afterwards you can look forward to, such as a phone call with a friend or a walk,
- Recognize the child may experience conflicting emotions including concern for the parents, guilt about their feelings towards you. Expect there may be behavior challenges after the visit.

GET HELP:

- Identify people in the child's family and community who you could work with to help the child maintain connections to their culture and community.
- Put the child first and recognize the importance of connecting with people and places from their past.
- Ask the caseworker, therapist, or other professional for assistance in mediating the relationship to improve communication, if necessary.
- Ensure you are familiar with the visitation plan and discuss any concerns with the caseworker if the child is in foster care.

