

EQUIPPED FOR THE JOURNEY

Visit Days



the
RESTORE NETWORK
changing the culture of foster care

Friends,

We all know birth family visits can bring out lots of big feelings for our kids. For some, there is happiness and anticipation. But for most, the experience is more conflicting. As foster parents, we most often see this in our kids' behaviors in the hours leading up to a visit or in the days following. These visits often trigger our kids and bring up memories of experiences that cause them to be anxious. Birth family members may say things that confuse them. In addition, foster care agencies generally do not provide therapeutic environments for these visits and often these visits aren't even supervised by an agency employee. This leaves our kids at risk for experiencing things they can't make sense of and causing them unnecessary harm.

I recognize that some of what is written in this resource guide relies entirely on your agency and how they are handling visits. And sometimes there isn't much we can do as foster parents to influence this. But for the sake of this resource guide, let's set aside our agency's involvement for a moment and just focus on what we can control. We can't make the visits stop, we can't force agencies to make the visits more healing, and we can't remove the triggers for our kids.

But there are actually lots of things we CAN do. And that is what this resource guide is about.

Because here is the good news! Regardless of how great your agency is at facilitating visits, the truth is that we foster parents actually make more of a difference in how our children interpret their visits than the case work team. Coming home to a safe and nurturing adult can calm your child's fear response and help them make sense of all that they're experiencing.

That being said, there will be times when you need to speak up and advocate for your child in regards to visits. Restore families have had success: stopping visits that were harmful, changing the location of visits, requesting permission to transport to visits, changing visits from unsupervised to supervised, requesting biological family confirm visit attendance in advance so children don't have to travel unnecessarily, etc. Regarding any concerns you have, speak first with your case worker. If you don't get a helpful response, go up the chain of command and speak with a supervisor. Engage the CASA or GAL if necessary. And as always, reach out to your Restore Network County Director for help as well!

Thank you for caring for your children as they navigate the complexities of birth family interactions!



Ashley Bennett
Director of Trauma-Informed Care
abennett@TheRestoreNetwork.org
www.TheRestoreNetwork.org



What changes might you see in your kids around visit days?

Let's start by identifying what types of behaviors we might see in our kids around visit days:

- Defiance
- Tantrums
- Anger
- Withdrawal
- Push-Pull Attachment Relationship (I need you / I don't need you)
- Sleep disturbances
- Sibling conflict
- Issues at school
- Heightened anxiety
- Hyperactivity
- Hypervigilance
- Very emotional or clingy
- Regression of behaviors

Why are visits so hard?



Competing emotions about the visits (happy, sad, scared, anxious, disappointed)



Seeing their family retrigger the abuse/neglect/trauma AND/OR the grief and sadness in the separation from their biological parents.



Guilt (they love their biological parents but also their foster parents)



Confusing things have been said during the visit. Birth parents sometimes misrepresent the truth or tell their children what they think they want to hear out of a desire to make them feel better. (Examples: You're coming home to me soon. You'll be home by Christmas. I only have one more thing to do). This type of talk can confuse a child if the case worker or foster parent isn't saying these same things. Some children really don't want to go back home and may be negatively triggered by these kinds of statements. Sometimes, birth family members may say disrespectful things about the case work team or foster parents which can also be very confusing to a child (Examples: They took you from me. I didn't do anything wrong. Don't call them mom and dad. They're lying.)



Inconsistency of visits (schedule changes, location changes, biological parents cancel or don't show up)



Family visits are not generally being held in therapeutic environments and there isn't much coaching given to parents during them. They can often be chaotic, especially when many children are present.



What can we do before visits to help?



Tell our children about the visit plan and walk them through it. This gives them some predictability and can help ease their concerns. We all feel better when we know what to expect!

Where is the visit? Who will be there? How long will it last? Who is taking them and bringing them back? Make sure to ask them if they have any questions.

When visits first begin, make a plan for after the visit so the child understands they're coming back to you. "Hey, don't forget we're having tacos for dinner when you come back, do you want soft shells or hard shells?" or "Let's plan to finish building that lego castle when you come back this afternoon!"

For some kids, overcommunicating the details of the visit will really help put them at ease and prepare them. You can put visit days on a calendar for the child and help them track how many days till the next one.

But for other children, the idea of visits will be negatively triggering. With these children, you'll want to not do so many reminders throughout the week as it will bring about unnecessary fear responses. These children may more likely need to just learn it is visit day a few hours before they go. Get to know your child and learn which way of handling visits best meets their needs.



Create a "Visit Backpack." It could include:

- good food, water bottle (food/water during a visit will mean a better transition home for you!)
- comfort item
- activity for the car ride or visit time "Would you like to take your lego set to show your mom?"
- artwork, letters, pictures to share with biological family
- your notebook with letter written to biological parents
- a note to the child to have a great visit, which helps them feel that you support their family. Letting your child know that you are part of the team that wants to see their family restored can go a long way in their feelings of safety around visits.



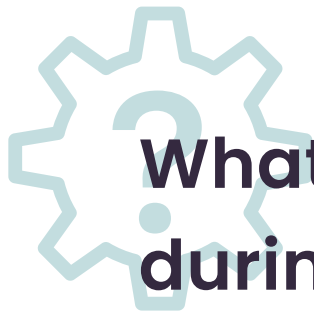
If a child is already showing anxiousness or fear before a visit, try engaging the child in a fun activity with you or talk to them about what they're feeling. Allow all emotions and don't try to fix anything, just be present, responsive, and attuned. Say things like, "I can see that today's visit is bringing up lots of emotions" or "How can I help you feel safe right now?"



Communicate positively **AT ALL TIMES** about their biological family. Share their emotions. Be excited that they get to see their family regardless of how you feel! Remain neutral about it if the child is neutral or upset. Just let them know they can talk to you when they're ready. Remaining positive keeps the wall low between the two of you if they're feeling guilty or confused.



Create a good-bye ritual: a saying "good bye alligator-after awhile crocodile," a handshake, a joke, a card game while you wait for the transporter, a snack together.



What can we do during visits?



Provide transportation to the visits, supervise the visits, or participate in the visits if possible. While this isn't always an option, there are times when it can be and these things should be discussed with the case work team. Your presence in the car or during a visit, even just waiting in the lobby, can help a child feel safer and build trust between you.



Allow the child to see a warm and positive relationship between you and the biological parents. This relieves some of the mixed emotions and guilt they generally feel.



Encourage the relationship between the child and their parent. Provide coaching if appropriate. You can suggest topics the child share with the parent, encourage questions for the parent to ask, show photos on your phone of the child and tell stories, or get an activity started for them.

What can we do after visits?



Make a consistent post-visit transition plan. Do the same thing every time to build predictability.



Have a reconnecting “hello” ritual. It can be the same saying, handshake, or joke you used before. It can be a 10 minute walk. A 5 minute snuggle on the couch. Anything that brings you together with the child for a few minutes



Use physical activity right after a visit to relieve child’s **BIG FEELINGS**. Stop at the park after a visit before going home. Go for a walk. Jump on the trampoline. This releases healthy neurotransmitters, calms the stress response system which is likely in overdrive. Them moving their body completes the stress cycle and tells them they survived. **REALLY IMPORTANT!**



Be silent. Asking too many questions about the visit can be overwhelming and some children need quiet and alone time following a visit. Talk about the visits later when some time has passed and they are more regulated.



Simplify the rest of your evening or the next day. Don’t make big plans. Stay home. Make dinner in the crockpot or pick up pizzas. Eat, play, sleep.



Be extra nurturing and empathetic on these days. Our children are dealing with big experiences that are really too much for most of them to handle appropriately. Expect poor responses from them and be extra forgiving. Minimize what you need from them those nights---maybe limit chores or cancel homework. It’s not fair for us to punish and give consequences to behaviors that are a direct result of experiencing fear and/or grief.



Help your children learn about their response patterns following these visits. When you are both regulated, call out what you see and help them make a plan for handling things better the next time. "I noticed you were really sad when you got home yesterday. What should we do when you get home next week and feel the same way?" "I noticed you were really angry tonight and said some mean things to your siblings. It is okay to feel anger. It is not okay to say mean things. Last week after your family visit, the same thing happened. What can we do next time you feel angry after a family visit? Let's make a list."



Is the child grieving the separation from their biological parent? Encourage the child to write the parent a letter, draw a picture, pick out a new item to show them next week, and place them in the "visit backpack." Giving them something tangible to do can help them feel more in control of the moment.



Take notes about how the child does after a visit and look for patterns. Be proactive to make routine changes as needed to help the child succeed.



How to help if a visit is cancelled or birth parents don't show:

- Communicate the reason honestly without blame & have empathy for any BIG FEELINGS they have about it.
- Continue with the rest of the normal visit-day routine. Use choices to give them power for how they fill this time.
- If they're sad, encourage the child to write the parent a letter, draw a picture, pick out a new item to show them next week, and place them in the "visit backpack." Giving them something tangible to do can help them feel more in control of the moment.
- If they're sad, provide more nurture and connection on these days. Keep them close. And remember SAD LOOKS MAD!



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3993 Fosterburg Rd., Alton, IL 62002

www.TheRestoreNetwork.org
www.facebook.com/TheRestoreNetwork

Katie Myette
(618) 258-7244 x703
kmyette@TheRestoreNetwork.org