

Improving Visitation Through the Fostering Relationship Visitation Model



Thanks to current research into visitation and issues surrounding it, the Department of Family Services is changing the way it conducts family visitation. DFS is transitioning to the Fostering Relationship Visitation Model, a more effective method of strengthening bonds between foster parents, parents and children.

Why Changes Were Made

A team of researchers at the University of Delaware—led by Dr. Mary Dozier, chair of the child development department and principal investigator of the school’s Infant Caregiver Project—have followed several populations of at-risk children, studying the effects of early adversity on development in early childhood.

One area of study and extension on Dozier’s research is visitation between children and parents once children are removed from parental care and placed in out-of-home care or foster homes. The research has indicated that parents are often limited to supervised visitation at an office or “visitation center.”

Research shows that these visits often go poorly due to the following factors:

- Foster parents are sporadic in their attendance at these visits, which limits co-parenting opportunities and may cause children to feel anxiety in the absence of their primary caregiver (foster parent).
- There is often little structure or preparation for the visit, including parents who may not have developed skills for interacting with their children in this type of situation.
- Parents have unrealistic expectations of how their children will react to them during the visit.
- Children may feel uncomfortable around parents, while parents may push too quickly for intimacy.
- Parents may feel rejected by their children or threatened by the relationship that has developed between the children and their foster parents.

When any of these situations occur, children and parents may become upset, uncomfortable or embarrassed. As a result parents often miss visits which puts further distance between parents and children, distrust between foster parents and parents, and ultimately delays in reunification.

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To improve upon the goals and results of visitation, the Child Haven Visitation Center has adopted the Fostering Relationship Visitation Model. The goal of this program is to:

- Strengthen the relationship between foster parents and parents.
- Help parents have successful visits, feel less rejected by their children, and feel encouraged to continue future visits.
- Increase foster and birth parents partnerships.

Research has shown that this model shortens the time children remain in foster care, strengthens the partnership between foster parents and parents, and decreases the anxiety in children as the parents and foster parents positively co-parent the child. By working together, there is an increased likelihood that parents will feel supported by foster parents, parents will have pleasant interactions with their children. Parents and foster parents work together to learn how to follow the children’s lead and meet the children’s needs.

Watch for further information in *The Caregiver Courier* over the next few months. You’ll see the change as we move from what visitation was—observing, documenting and correcting behaviors of parents—to what visitation should be: parents seeing, engaging and enjoying time with their children.