



Practice Bulletin: Family Interaction as a Pathway to Permanency OCTOBER 2009



This was primarily accomplished through the hard work of a group of practice champions from DHS, providers, foster parents and attorneys who gave a great deal of time and effort to train their peer and community partners. This initiative has gotten off to a great start because we share some common beliefs about family interaction.

We believe:

Interactions between parents and children should only be limited when there is some threat of harm that makes it necessary to do so.

When interactions need to be monitored by others, there should be clear goals that identify for everyone what has to be different in order for interactions to move to a less restrictive plan.

These goals should be identified when developing the family interaction plan. The plan should be developed during a family team meeting by the entire team, and a deadline to review progress should be set at the initial meeting.

Interactions between parents and children should be in the most homelike setting possible so the child can feel safe. This means we should strive to utilize the parent's home when possible, relative's homes, foster homes and as a last resort a neutral setting that is as homelike as it can be.

Interactions should be built around meaningful activities: mealtimes, bathing, naptimes, homework time, doctors appointments, school activities, sports activities, and should be geared towards the child's developmental abilities.

Family interactions are the responsibility of the entire team working with the family.

Foster parents play a pivotal role, due to their unique position as the child's caregiver. Children benefit

"The primary purpose of family interaction is to maintain the parent-child relationship and other family attachments and to reduce the sense of abandonment which children experience at placement. For parents, family interaction is the time to: enhance the parent's ability to adequately and appropriately care for and relate to the child; help the parent(s) develop appropriate parenting behaviors; and identify and resolve problems before the child returns home." Research tells us that successful reunification can be achieved more timely when we closely team with birth parents and involve them as full partners in their plan.

Introduction: Over the past six months, both DHS and Children's Justice emphasized the concepts and principles supporting meaningful family interaction through a series of presentations and workshops.



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greatly from the partnering between birth parents and foster parents.

Finally, we believe we can get to permanency in a timelier manner if we are able to change the way we practice as it relates to family interactions.

The Family Interaction Initiative recognizes that regular, reliable and goal oriented interaction between children in placement and their parents and family members are fundamental to achieving permanency. The federal Fostering Connections Act and the CFSR support the foundational philosophy of family interaction.

Not only is family interaction a pathway to earlier permanency for the child, it also provides the best chance for reunification as the child/parent relationship is enhanced and maintained.

those parents are able to actively meet the child's needs.

We also know that when children see their parents more frequently, the child will move more quickly to permanence - whether by returning home or by moving to another permanent placement.

Family interaction should never be used as a reward or punishment.... it is a parental right.

Why do we want to assure that children maintain a relationship with their parents and stay connected through frequent interaction?

Without frequent family interaction, the parent/child relationship deteriorates; which is just the opposite of what we want to achieve. We know that when children are removed from their parents, they suffer loss and grief. Loss is the greatest emotional trauma. When children are allowed early and frequent contact with their parents it reduces negative effects of loss, reduces fantasies/fears about the well-being of the parent, and reduces self-blame.

Safety must be a priority in considering whether family interaction should be professionally monitored based on the child's need for protection. At a minimum, interaction should occur within 24 hours of placement, should be regular and of increasing frequency and duration.

Expectations:

- Children and parents have a right to spend time together. Family interactions are planned interventions central to the reunification process. Family interaction should only be restricted if there is a risk of harm to the child. The primary purpose of family interaction is to maintain the parent-child relationship and other family attachments and to reduce the sense of abandonment which children experience at

Research¹

Here's what we now know is best for kids:

- When children are in foster care it is essential that we create opportunities for them to see their parents so that the parent-child bond can be maintained.
- Contact needs to be as frequent as possible- the younger the child, the more often they need to see their parents.
- Family interaction needs to take place in settings that allow the parent to practice age-appropriate care giving activities with the child. Children develop healthy attachments to parents when

¹ Family Interaction Slide Presentation to IDHS:
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From The Institute for Human Services
Apri2009



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- placement. For parents, family interaction is the time to: enhance the parent's ability to adequately and appropriately care for and relate to the child; help the parent(s) develop appropriate parenting behaviors; and identify and resolve problems before the child returns home.
- Family interaction should take place in the least restrictive, most homelike setting appropriate to meet the child's needs for safety. It should minimize the harmful effects of family separation as well as nurture and enhance reunification. Frequent and developmentally appropriate family interaction benefits the child emotionally, and is the strongest indicator of family reunification and achievement of permanency.
- Interactions provide the opportunity for families to maintain relationships, enhance well-being and to learn, practice and demonstrate new behaviors and patterns of interaction. Family Interactions should be seen as an integral part of the family's case plan and should not be seen as something extra that needs to be done on a case.
- Interactions should be guided by a family interaction plan that encourages progressive increase in parent's responsibility and is premised on case goals and on an assessment of family functioning and of risk to the child, (Hess & Proch, 1988, 1992). A written family interaction plan, tailored to meet the safety needs of the family, should be developed in the context of a family team meeting to assure family interaction begins as soon as possible after removal from parental custody. Family interaction plans must never be used as a threat or form of discipline for the child or to control or punish the parent.

Save yourself time and be even more effective:

As part of the team, you may choose to participate in monitoring a family interaction as a way to observe and assess the child, parent, and their relationship.

GOALS OF FAMILY INTERACTION:

- Reduce the child's sense of abandonment and loss upon removal
- Resolve the threats of harm requiring that family interactions be monitored
- Provide the opportunity for families to maintain relationships, to enhance well-being, and to learn, practice and demonstrate new behaviors and patterns of interaction.
- Maintain meaningful contact consistent with the development and/or special needs of the child and family that will further progress toward achieving permanency for the child
- Maintain relationships with siblings, parents, and other individuals
- Provide opportunity to assess caregiver/child relationship
- Provide opportunity to assess caregiver needs: parent training; community resources/referral; and concrete supports



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Developing the Family Interaction Plan

Carefully planned family interaction is a powerful family reunification intervention tool. Family interaction can help implement many essential family reunification goals, including maintaining the parent/child/sibling relationships, learning and practicing parenting skills, helping family members confront reality, and documenting progress towards reunification goals.

Role of the Case Worker

- Responsible for the development of a written family interaction plan.
- Inform parent of their responsibilities.
- Assess family attachment and extended family connection.
- Evaluate the success of the interaction plan and revise the plan during a team meeting when the situation changes.
- Professionally monitor family interaction, if needed.
- Work with child and parent over setbacks in plan.
- Provide conflict resolution to the plan.
- Stress to all that safety is sole responsibility of parent.

Role of the Parent

- Insure emotional and physical safety and well-being of child.
- Provide or support transportation or help problem-solve transportation barriers whenever possible.
- Attend family interaction as scheduled and engage in discussion regarding progress and concerns observed in their Interactions.
- Call in advance to cancel and discuss cancellation with child.
- Assume the parental role during interactions and keep their children safe.

- Respond to direction during visits.
- Follow agreed-to rules and conditions.
- Plan age-appropriate activities with their children.

Role of the Foster Parent/Caregiver

- Assist or provide transportation of child.
- Have regular on-going contact with parent.
- Permit family interaction in foster homes.
- Active in arranging family interaction.
- Document behavior before, during, and after.
- Encourage contact and support child.
- Have child ready to participate.
- Pack clothing and other essentials for interactions.
- Help child accept separation from parent - life book opportunities.
- Role model and encourage consistency with the parent in dealing with the child.

Role of the Provider

- Prioritize and support the development of the family interaction plan.
- Support the parent, foster family, child and DHS case worker to ensure that family interaction is happening in a safe manner.
- Work with the family to ensure they are aware of their responsibilities to be prepared for family interaction.
- The provider will:
 - Assess family attachment and extended family connection, evaluate success of plan, supervise family interaction, if needed, work with child and parent over setbacks in plan, help resolve conflicts that arise with the plan, and stress to all that safety is the responsibility of the parent during interactions.



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The most effective way of developing a family interaction plan is during a family team meeting!!!!

- ❑ Set clear goals to be accomplished before family interactions can move to the next phase. For example, what does the parent need to be able to demonstrate so the interactions can move to semi-monitored?
- ❑ Make sure decisions to have supervised interactions are based on safety concerns and not as punishment for something the parent may have done.

Practice Tips:

- ❑ Make sure family interaction is a focus of family team meetings.
- ❑ Work with family team facilitators to ensure everyone who should be at the table in the family team meeting is present. For example, if a family is hesitant to have the foster family at the table we need to work with the family to help them understand the importance of having all the team members at the table who will be helping them have interactions with their children.
- ❑ Make sure in your communication with foster parents that you have expectations regarding their involvement in helping family interactions occur in the most homelike setting possible and at times that work for the family and child.
- ❑ Make sure the family interaction plan is written down and copies are provided to all the parties, including attorneys.
- ❑ Work with your providers to find family and community resources who can help with transportation and/or monitor family interactions to ensure interactions can occur as frequently as possible.
- ❑ Re-evaluate the family interaction plan at every family team meeting, especially when there has not been a change in the plan for several months.
- ❑ Revise the written family interaction plan as necessary to ensure it is meeting the family's needs.

Resources:

Family Interaction Training Curriculum - Lori Mozena M.S. LMFT and Christine Secrist PhD LMFT

Family Interaction Slide Presentation to IDHS:
Norma M. Ginther, M.S.W., L.I.S.W.
Jeffrey D. Ginther, J.D.

From The Institute for Human Services
April 2009

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