



Family Interaction Standards

The philosophy of family interaction is a fundamental way of thinking about how children who have been removed from the home continue to have meaningful interactions with the people who care about them in the least traumatic way possible. 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 parents develop appropriate parenting behaviors; and
- Identify and resolve problems before the child returns home.

Supporting family interaction involves a certain level of risk. Family interaction is not an event, but a process.

The goals of family interaction:

- Reduce the child's sense of abandonment and loss upon removal;
- Reduce the threats of maltreatment requiring that family interactions be monitored;
- Interactions provide the opportunity for families to:
 - Maintain relationships,
 - Enhance well-being,
 - Provide families with the opportunity to learn, practice, and demonstrate new behaviors and patterns of interaction.
- Maintain meaningful contact consistent with the development 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 the caregiver and child relationship; and
- Provide opportunity to assess caregiver needs:
 - Parent training
 - Community resources and referral
 - Concrete supports

In order to achieve positive results associated with family interaction, this set of standards and practice guidance was developed in collaboration with the Department of Human Services (DHS) and external stakeholders to ensure that family interaction is to maintain the parent-child relationship and other family attachments and reduce the sense of abandonment which children experience at placement.

Standard 1: Family Interaction is a planned ongoing process that requires thorough preparation to make sure that parent-child and other family involvement is maintained while ensuring the safety needs of the child are addressed.

All children placed out of the home need to have family interaction planning to ensure interactions occur in safe and healthy ways. Family interaction should occur in the least restrictive, most homelike setting that allows for natural interaction and appropriate to meet the child's needs for safety. This means we should strive to use 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.

Creativity in defining interactions should be supported. Every opportunity needs to be considered such as doctor visits, school activities, meetings and other functions in which the family would have participated if the children were in the home. Interaction planning with siblings should be considered when applicable. Interaction planning allows the team to assess parental abilities, the parent child bond, and other family relationships. It also allows the opportunity to assess the caregiver's needs regarding community resources and concrete supports.

All members of the family and team will be prepared to participate in family interaction planning by ensuring a concrete explanation of the family interaction goals have been provided to the family. Family interaction needs to address the reasons for placement and the safety concerns that exist. All participants in interaction planning should be aware of:

- The goals of family interaction planning,
- Their possible roles and responsibilities, and
- Involvement in implementing family interactions.

Family interaction is successful when caregivers (i.e., foster parents, resource families, relatives, kinship, suitable others, etc.) are included early in this process to show they are part of the team. It is important that the caregivers have a voice in when and how the caregiver can be an active part of the planning process. Caregivers may need some encouragement and preparation about the importance of their involvement and the importance of family interaction for the family and siblings. The caregivers will know of the daily activities of the child so that the parent can be included in medical, school, and therapy appointments.

Standard 2: Family engagement is the ongoing process of developing and maintaining a mutually beneficial, trust-based relationship that empowers and respects the family and sustains their interest and participation in the change process. Family engagement is essential to ensuring effective family interaction planning.

Diligent effort is made to join with the family and the family's natural supports throughout the case to ensure that needs are met and child safety and well-being are assured. Successful and productive relationships with families are earned over time through repeated, positive contacts that develop trust.

Family members are encouraged to define what "family" means to them and who "family" is. Attempts are made to engage all identified family members in services including attendance at the family team meeting and support of family interactions. Family interactions are most "natural" when interactions are supported by those with a relationship with the child, such as other family members versus professionals. We know that the wider the circle of "family" the more likely the family will remain engaged with one another beyond case closure. Family supports can be relied on to assist with all aspects of services including attendance at meetings, role modeling, transportation, observing interactions, etc.

The parents, custodial and noncustodial, children and youth, and other key family supports voices will be heard during family interaction planning. Each person's input is valued and needed to ensure quality interactions that meet the unique needs of each family. It is strongly recommended that interactions should be planned with careful consideration to developmental guidelines and the attainment of optimal family engagement.

Standard 3: Family Interaction planning and implementation ensures that children and youth maintain relationships with parents, kin, and other supports.

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.

Removal is a traumatic event for a child. Children who have been removed from the home need to continue to have meaningful interactions with the people who care about them in the least traumatic way possible. It is critical to a child's emotional and mental health that the child's connections to family, community, kin, and friends be preserved to the greatest extent possible as the family works towards permanency. A child's connections should be identified and efforts made to ensure the child has access to them as soon as possible.

In cases where parents are incarcerated, efforts should be made to facilitate interactions as appropriate and allowable through the facility. Interaction planning will include not only interaction with primary caregivers, but the child's other connections. Creative planning should not only support face-to-face time but also other methods, such as calls, letters, texting, emails, and other electronic methods of communication. Families will be encouraged to explore other ways to connect and interact with one another.

Ongoing training and support, and clear identification of participant's roles and responsibilities are critical to the success of family interaction. All participants involved in family interaction planning need to have a clear understanding of the importance of connection not only from the perspective of the child's emotional and mental health, but also from the standpoint of effectively working towards permanency. This shared vision is as important as the logistics of interaction planning.

Standard 4: Family Interaction is incorporated throughout the *Life of the Case (LOC)*.

Family interaction is an effective strategy used to meet behavioral outcomes that must be achieved to reach permanency. Successful family interaction planning requires that a family select, own, and support the desired outcomes of adequate family functioning and well-being leading to permanency. Setting clear and measurable outcomes allows all those involved in planning to understand and agree about what it will take to achieve permanency from the beginning of the case. Progress toward these goals and benchmarks should be reviewed ongoing with the family, preferably during a family team meeting. This provides critical opportunities for the team to assess movement toward permanency and adapt family interaction planning accordingly.

The focus should be not on process and compliance but rather on the safety concerns identified at the time of removal. The elements to explore in assessing safety include three basic constructs: threats of maltreatment, child vulnerability, and caretaker's protective capacities.

- **Threats of maltreatment** mean the aggravating factors that combine to produce a potentially dangerous situation.
 - Situation (unsafe home, criminal activity)
 - Behavior (impulsive actions, assaults)
 - Emotion (immobilizing depression)
 - Motive (intention to hurt the child)
 - Perception (viewing child as a devil)
 - Capacity (physical disability)
- **Child vulnerability** means the degree that a child cannot on the child's own avoid, negate or minimize the impact of present or impending danger.
 - **Present danger** means immediate, significant, and clearly observed maltreatment which is occurring to a child in the present or there is an immediate threat of maltreatment requiring immediate action to protect the child.
 - **Impending danger** means a foreseeable state of danger in which family behaviors, attitudes, motives, emotions, or the child's physical environment poses a threat of maltreatment.
- **Protective capacities** mean family strengths or resources that reduce, control, or prevent threats of maltreatment.

Family interaction needs to be reviewed, at a minimum, when:

- There are changes in behavioral patterns demonstrated by the parents or children.
- Protective provisions that may be a safety concern change or arise.
- There is a change in family supports.
- There is a change in legal issues or court requirements (change in custody or guardianship) that may impact family interaction planning.
- Agreed upon behavioral changes are or are not accomplished.

Standard 5: Cultural dynamics of the child and family are identified and accommodated through adjustments in strategies, services, and supports for the family in the family interaction process.

Cultural competence means the ability of individuals and systems to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and faiths or religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, tribes, and communities, and protects and preserves the dignity of each.

Successful cultural competence includes:

- A basic understanding of the values and beliefs within the culture coupled with eliciting information from the child and family about traditions, cultural beliefs, behaviors, and functioning;
- Demonstration of values and attitudes that promote mutual respect;
- Communication styles that reflect sensitivity and competence to the values and beliefs of others;
- Accommodations in the physical environment including settings, materials, and resources that are culturally and linguistically responsive;
- Acknowledgement of the role of race, ethnicity, economic status, spirituality, and culture play in families lives; and
- Demonstration of a genuine interest in the family's culture and an understanding of how that culture has been historically treated by the dominant culture.

Involving the family in interaction planning will ensure the family's culture and rituals are respected. The family's cultural dynamics will be taken into consideration during family interaction planning. There will be a basic understanding of the family's values and beliefs, religious practices, communication, and any necessary accommodations to family interaction planning. For example, tribal holidays and events will be recognized and planned for accordingly.

Individuals who may be supervising family interactions should possess a level of competence and understanding of the culture in which the family has gained its understanding of child rearing practices. Families who speak languages other than English may require cultural accommodations such as through the use of interpreters or someone supervising who speaks the language to ensure clear communication during family interactions.

Accommodations should be made to meet the special needs of the child or family during family interaction planning. Examples of such circumstances include cases where the family does not speak English or is not part of the majority culture. Individuals may be needed to provide support to a child or to help manage behaviors during an interaction. When special circumstances exist, it may be necessary to involve an individual who has specialized knowledge and skills to supervise interactions. For example, someone who is a member of the family's culture or ethnic group could be the one supervising interactions.

Standard 6: A *Family Interaction Plan* is developed or reassessed during every family team meeting involving a child who is placed out of the home.

A written *Family Interaction Plan*, tailored to meet the safety needs of the family will be provided 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 to the child or to control or punish the parent. When the family has input and feels engaged in the process, they are more likely to successfully follow through with the plan and achieve permanency.

The *Family Interaction Plan* should be reviewed and revised during a family team meeting. However, not all children placed out of the home will have a family team meeting but family interaction planning should occur. Subsequent family interaction planning may or may not occur in a family team meeting. When behavioral outcomes are met (or not met) before the next scheduled family team meeting, the *Family Interaction Plan* may be reviewed before the meeting. Family interactions are the responsibility of the entire team working with the family.

It is critical for the team to keep in mind during the completion of the *Family Interaction Plan* that frequent and developmentally appropriate family interaction benefits the child emotionally, and is the strongest indicator of family reunification and achievement of permanency. Interactions must attempt to involve the parents in routine activities of parenting and provide opportunities to enhance their parenting skills. Interactions should be built around meaningful activities including:

- Mealtimes,
- Bathing,
- Naptimes,
- Homework time,
- Doctors' appointments,
- School activities,
- Sports activities, and
- Should be geared towards the child's developmental abilities.

The following logistics need to be explored during the development of the *Family Interaction Plan*:

- Who is available to assist with transportation,
- Who is available and suitable to supervise the interactions,
- Who is allowed to be present during interactions, and
- What behaviors would immediately terminate an interaction.

In the event that a team member is not present during the family team meeting but is identified as a support to carry out the interactions, follow up communication must occur to ensure that they are available and in agreement to the *Family Interaction Plan*.

The *Family Interaction Plan* will identify the benchmarks that parents need to accomplish to achieve permanency. Interactions will become more frequent and for longer periods of time as the parents continue to meet behavioral benchmarks that reduce threats and increase their protective capacities. The level of supervision will also decrease as parents become better able to protect the children. The *Family Interaction Plan* will be reassessed and modified in the event that the permanency goal for the child changes.

Consideration regarding revisions to family interaction could be reviewed by addressing the following questions:

- What were the changes we expected to see within the context of the safety constructs?
- Have we accomplished the agreed-upon behavioral changes? If not, why not?
- How are we going to benchmark and communicate about benchmarks?
- How will we know when we are done, not just compliance, but sustained behavioral changes which will ensure as we depart?
- What will it take to maintain or increase family interactions for this family? (specific protective capacities, reduced child vulnerability, supports (formal or informal), services, etc.)
- What has been tried in family interaction planning in moving to the next phase? Identify strengths and risks that can be tried again or modified? (informal supports, visiting children in their current placement, etc.)
- What new things that haven't been tried before, could be tried to increase family interactions? (informal supports, services (including placement), or court actions, etc.)
- How can we involve the family, including the noncustodial parent, more fully in achieving family interactions while addressing child safety, reducing risks, and increasing strengths? (FTDM, youth-led meeting, engaging extended family, concrete supports, parent partners, etc.)

Standard 7: A quality assurance and improvement process is used to assess and improve the quality of Family Interaction.

It is part of ongoing practice development and improvement to assess the effectiveness of family interaction in regard to engaging families, conducting assessment and planning activities, and facilitating the timely and safe return of children to their homes.

The measurable indicators of the effectiveness of family interaction include the following for each family interaction standard:

- **Process planning:** Families are adequately prepared for the family interaction planning process, emphasizing the importance of active family participation, the safety needs of children, and the progression of the family interaction process as reflected in family team decision-making documentation or initial family interaction planning.
- **Engagement:** Family engagement is evidenced in their active and ongoing participation in the family interaction planning process, reflected in the *Family Interaction Plan*.
- **Connections:** The *Family Interaction Plan* should include not only planned interactions with primary caregivers, but the child's other critical connections, such as noncustodial parents, extended family, community ties, and friends.
- **Life of the Case (LOC):** *Family Interaction Plans* will be implemented, reviewed, and revised on an ongoing basis throughout the Life of the Case.
- **Cultural competency:** Appropriate integration of cultural accommodation in the family interaction planning process is acknowledged by the family.
- **Family Team Decision-Making:** A thorough *Family Interaction Plan* is developed during family team meetings for all children placed out of home. If a *Family Interaction Plan* is already in place, the plan is reviewed or modified during all subsequent family team meetings.
- **Quality assurance and improvement:** One standardized measurement process is used statewide to assess and maintain quality of all family interactions. When issues are identified, adjustments and adaptations are made to improve the process and results.