



# What is visit coaching?

A parent-to-parent guide

## 'I Can and Will Do This!'

I had courage but I needed support to bring my son home.

BY CRYSTAL WAGENHURST

When child protective services took my son Logan, I thought my life was over. Logan was 9 months old. I didn't know anything about the foster care system.

After an emergency hearing, I got visits with him twice each week for one hour. I spent two years visiting him without missing any of those visits. But I didn't leave Logan's father, who the agency considered a threat.

### High Hopes

Then in June of 2013 I found out I was pregnant again. I was happy because I wanted another child. In August 2013 my second son, Brycyn, was born. I was allowed to take Brycyn home from the hospital, and I had high hopes that I would soon have Logan home, too.

But Brycyn was placed in foster care in December 2013 when he was 4 months old because I still had not broken off my relationship with the boys' father. I was very angry.

### A Coach and Ally

My visits with Brycyn started out in a room with a two way mirror at the County agency for one hour twice a week. But in March, I was placed in a program called Visit Coaching. My Visit Coach, Robyn, supported me as I played and connected with Brycyn. We went to parks, took walks in the woods, and enjoyed picnics. As we worked together, I learned that I could recognize Brycyn's needs and meet them.

Robyn has been a great asset when I need to vent my problems because she listens and does not judge. Working with Robyn, I grew the courage to write letters to the foster family and to my sons to express that I loved them.

Through the visit coaching, I came to know Brycyn's foster family very well. For our visits, foster mother packed Brycyn man-sized lunches with all of his favorite foods. We had a birthday party to celebrate Brycyn's first birthday together. They even hosted a Christmas party for my family in their home. Then, in May 2014, Logan was moved to the same foster home.



### Proud but Scared

My Visit Coach also had a huge impact on me by introducing me to Rise. Rise helped me understand that there are other parents out there who have been or still are going through what I am going through. Rise helped me to not be afraid of my past but to push forward and keep going.

Between the visit coaching and Rise, I began to take responsibility for my decisions.

In September 2013 I agreed to do a voluntary termination of parental rights for Logan so he could be adopted by the foster family. I made that very hard decision because I loved him and wanted what was best for him. I was living in a shelter and not working and I didn't know how I could support two sons.

But I am now getting ready to receive Brycyn home after a year of hard work.

### From 'I Can't' to 'I Will'

Four years after Logan first went into foster care, I have accomplished everything the County asked of me. I found enough strength to finally leave the father of my sons. I am also employed full-time at Wal-Mart, and after only two months I received Employee of the Month. I have officially signed a lease for my very first apartment. Even though I was going through all of this turmoil, I maintained a college education and earned my business degree.

I have learned that life is a journey and every journey has a beginning and an end. Somewhere in the middle of the journey you may hit a road block like I did. It can feel like you have no choices. I kept saying, "I can't do this!" but with support I was able to start to say, "Ok, I can and will do this!" I am thankful I had the support of caring people and the courage to press on to become a stronger, more confident parent. I did it for my sons.

*Crystal reunified with Brycyn on May 11, 2015.*

# 'You Were Amazing!'

*Visit Coaches help parents bond with their children.*

BY LYNNE MILLER

When I learned about a program called Visit Coaching, which is designed to help families have better quality visits, I decided to get trained to be a coach.

I know from experience how important visits are. My own son was in foster care. By coming early to visits and playing with him, I was able to show him that I loved him even though we were separated. But visits can also reflect all the pain, anger, confusion and fear that children and parents feel. Instead of being a time to come together, visits can feel awkward and upsetting.

## **Listening and Guiding**

At the training sessions, I learned that coaches meet with the parents before and after each visit to talk about the parents' goals. Coaches also accompany the family on visits to places like parks and playgrounds, libraries, or restaurants.

Most of all, I learned to listen to the parents, empathize, be nonjudgmental, and guide parents toward finding their own solutions to problems in their families.

## **Help Saying 'No'**

One mom I worked with was struggling with her kids' behavior because she just couldn't say no. Once we went to McDonald's and she bought each kid two sandwiches, fries, a milkshake and soda. Then the kids hardly ate anything.

I could see by the look on her face that Mom was upset, but she rationalized it, saying, "Well, they can take it back to the foster home."

I just let the visit flow, but afterward I told her, "I know you feel guilty because your kids are in foster care, but you have to learn to say no."

"I know, but it's just so hard," she said. I explained that if she didn't set limits with her children now, she would have a harder time when they came home.

## **Calm and Comfortable**

Before each successive visit, I reminded Mom to be strong and have faith in herself. On a later visit, her kids were asking for everything under the sun. But she said no, and she was positive in the way she did it. She just said, "Not today," or, "Sorry, we

can't afford that." Afterward, I patted her on the back and said, "You were amazing!"

One day, we all went to the park and she and the kids put on bathing suits and went in the sprinkler together. The mom had never done that before. The mom also went on the slide. She said to her kids, "I'm going to get stuck!" (She's a little chubby). But she got on with her kids pushing and pulling her, and she had fun. It was one of our best visits.

## **Screaming Matches**

Another family I worked with had communication issues. The visits were screaming matches. I tried not to interfere but once I knew them better, I simply leaned over to the mom and whispered, "Gee, your daughter reminds me so much of you! I wonder if that's why you guys argue so much."

After the visit, Mom told me, "You know, in that moment I realized that my daughter and I were acting the way my mom and I act, and I decided it wasn't going to be that way between us. I have to learn to listen and let her speak—something my own mom wouldn't do."

Mom chose to start family therapy. As time passed, I was so happy to see Mom sit and really listen to her daughter and respond with comments that let her daughter know that she'd heard her.

## **The Skills to Succeed**

Coaching other parents is difficult. I had to find the patterns that were holding the family back from connection. I also had to control my own emotions. The first time I saw this mom and daughter yelling at each other, it took a lot of self-control not to raise my voice, too! I had to remind myself: I am not here to boss anyone around. I am here to help them find answers for their family.

Some parents turn down Visit Coaching because they feel it's intrusive, but I believe the program can help put many families on a path to reunification and success after foster care.



Learn more about making the most of visits – and your legal rights to visits – at [www.risemagazine.org](http://www.risemagazine.org)