

Rise magazine is written by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

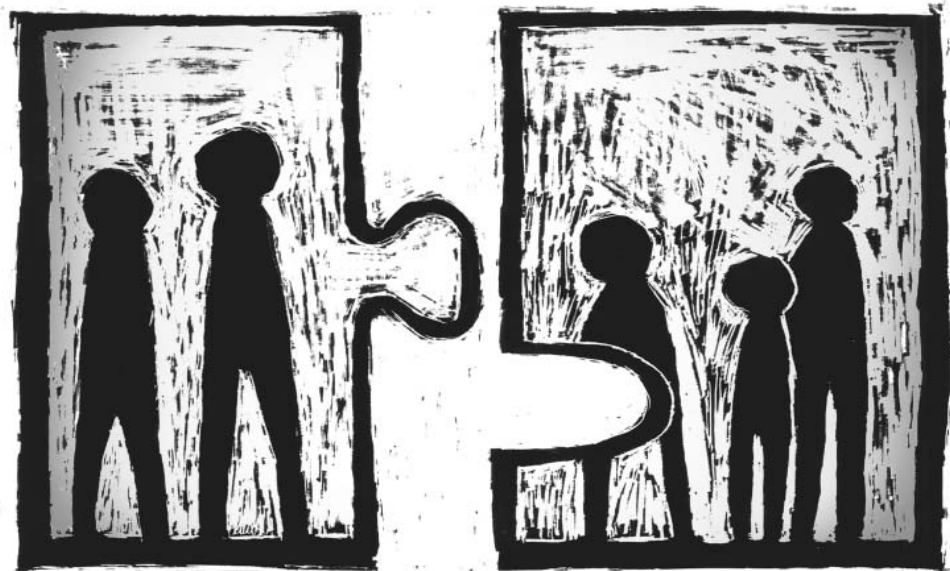
ISSUE NUMBER 19, SUMMER 2011

BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Making the Most of Visits

When children go into foster care, visits are a chance for families to maintain and strengthen the bonds they share. But visits can also bring out all the stress, sadness, and anger that families feel.

In this issue, parents show how they've made visits a special time despite the stress of supervision and the pain of saying good-bye. Parents and parent advocates call on the system to further improve visiting conditions and supports so that more families can successfully reunify.



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BY ANONYMOUS

When my daughter was 18 months old, she was removed from home because my husband and I were using drugs. At our first visit, my husband and I were very anxious. I was scared that my daughter would forget me or feel that I did not want her anymore.

Waiting in the hallway for our baby, we saw a Spanish man holding a little girl. The girl looked like my baby but she had bangs. Could that be her? My husband said, "It is her," and he grabbed her from the guy's arms, saying, "Sweetie." She grabbed him back and put her little head on his shoulders.

When I saw my daughter's haircut, I was so upset. She did not look like my daughter. I confronted the worker and she told me that the foster parents could not see her eyes. I told her, "They should have put her hair up!"

"I'm sorry," the worker said. "It will grow back."

Sad and Confused

During the visit, my daughter would not let go of us and was quiet. Her eyes gave a blank stare, moving ever so slowly. We tried to play toys with her but she just wanted comfort. She wrapped her body around me and rested her head on my shoulder. Her father and I rubbed her back and told her that we loved her very much and would fight to get her home.

At the end of the visit, it was hard to say goodbye. My daughter was crying so much. Her face was full of agony. She screamed, "Mommy! Daddy!" I can still remember her arms stretching out to us.

When I looked into her eyes, I felt despair and guilt. I cried and hugged and kissed her and told her we would see her again.

A Mom, But Not a Good One

Before my daughter was removed, I had a very bad addiction for almost 20 years. At times, I barely slept or ate. I wandered the streets looking for my next hit. I had six other children and didn't raise any of them. Two of my sons ended up in foster care and were adopted by their foster mom, who I asked to take my daughter when she went into foster care.

When I got pregnant with my daughter, I was determined to raise her. I stayed clean for six months. But I relapsed, even though I loved my daughter with all my heart.

While I was using, I tried to take care of my daughter. I put her to sleep by laying her on my stomach and rubbing her back until she fell asleep. I held her and comforted her when she cried. My daughter liked to be tickled on her tummy and she liked rolling a ball back and forth. When

she was old enough, I would take her to the park and push her on the swing and help her climb the jungle gym.

The best thing I remember during that time was my daughter's first birthday. I planned and saved money. I made tuna salad, baked macaroni and cheese, *pernil*, chicken and green salad. We had a big cake and *capias* for each guest. We taped the trees with streamers and hung a piñata stuffed with candy. All of my friends came and my sons' foster mother and her husband came with my two sons. That was the best thing—spending the day with my two sons and my baby.

My daughter was laughing and playing. I don't think she understood what was going on, but she was very

The more time I had with my daughter, the more connection I felt to her.

curious about her toys and ate a lot of cake. She even took her first steps that day.

I was a good mom to my daughter sometimes but not always. Other times I would sell her milk and food stamps for money, and I would leave her in her crib while I got high. I hated when my high came down and I had to face that I'd messed up as a mother. I would lie on the floor with my daughter watching TV and cry. My guilt was tremendous. I always prayed to God to forgive me.

Getting Ready

After my daughter went into foster care, we had visits at an agency for two years. The visit room had a small red couch and some little chairs. There was a toy room but the lady in charge was rarely there. So basically, it looked like an office: no toys and very gloomy green paint on the walls.

A few days before each visit, I would pack a bag of toys, coloring books and reading books. I tried to be ready for any activity. My husband and I would go shopping to buy our daughter a new outfit and things for

her hair.

My daughter would come wearing clothes that were too small, and her hair was never really done properly. So when she first came in to visits, I would hug her and then take her to the bathroom to change her clothes and do her hair.

Eating and Playing

It made me feel better that I was still able to take care of my daughter. Even when I was using crack, I would get my daughter clothes from the church and wash them by hand so she would look like a clean little girl. With her hair done, she looked like my little angel again. I also loved to be in the bathroom with my daughter, away from everybody else. It was my time to comfort my daughter and let her know that I loved her.

Then my daughter would usually eat a Happy Meal that my husband would bring for her, and for the rest of the visit, she and her father and I would play. Her favorite thing to do was color. She also liked us to bring kitchen things, like plates and spoons and forks. We would pretend we were cooking. Every visit, I brought a camera and took pictures to look at during my week.

When it was time to say goodbye, I tried not to cry because I did not want my daughter to see me hysterical. I would tell her, "I love you and I'll see you next week." My husband would ask, "What do you want us to bring to the next visit?" As she got older, she could tell us if she wanted any candy or a toy. Then we would say goodbye with a hug and a kiss.

Smothering Her With Love

When the judge gave my family unsupervised visits, it was such a weight off to leave the agency. I was able to really hold my daughter and smother her with all of my love. She would call out, "Mommy!" and give me hugs and kisses. The more time I had with my daughter, the more

connection I felt to her.

We would pick her up at 10 a.m. and bring her back by 4 p.m. We always made sure we were there early to pick her up and on time to drop her off. We would take her out to lunch, to the park and the playground, and to see all of our friends.

I loved taking her to the swimming pool. I bought her a little sky blue one-piece bathing suit. I would take her in the baby pool and watch her try to swim in the water. Now that I was sober, I was able to laugh and play in the water with her without any shame. My husband would meet us at the pool and we would go for lunch. These were moments that I did not want to let go of.

A Good Mother

Being out with my daughter sober was so much better. My thoughts were clear and I was able to take time to enjoy her laughter and her ideas.

I had never been sure that I could be a good mom. I was not raised by my mother; I was raised by the system. During moments when I felt I needed advice, I felt empty. Feeling empty and alone had fed my addiction.

In parenting classes I learned that I could become a real parent to my daughter and have family activities with her and my husband. I learned about unconditional love and how to show my daughter my love.

During visits, I was able to do motherly things with my daughter, like saying "I love you" and playing with her. I learned that I could be a good mother. I also found out that I am a responsible person. I was proud that I was able to plan outings with my daughter and make sure that I had packed what she needed, like milk, juice, diapers and a change of clothes.

The Little Things

The best parts of our visits were the little things: being able to hear her say "Mommy" and feeling her hand in mine. Simple things felt so good, like eating at a Chinese restaurant together, or asking my daughter about her brothers and her foster mother and how things were in her foster home. The best was taking my daughter to church with me. I was able to put her in a nice dress and shoes and finally introduce her to people there. That was something I had wanted for a long time.

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Fostering Connections

Agencies begin to recognize that visit conditions and supports make a difference.

Research shows that how often parents visit with their children is one of the strongest indicators of whether that family will successfully reunify. Here, Wanjiro Gethaiga, social work supervisor at the Center for Family Representation, explains how child welfare systems are beginning to strengthen visits so that families can reunify as quickly as possible:

Historically, visits weren't something the child welfare system thought that much about. The system was looking at what services would change the behaviors of Mom and Dad, and people did not always really understand that children need frequent communication and constant contact with their parents to feel safe in foster care. Unfortunately, with high caseloads and limited resources, visiting often fell to the bottom of a long list of tasks.

About 10 years ago, the field of child welfare slowly began changing its attitude toward visits. People began to have a greater understanding of children's attachment to their parents and needs. Children were moving from home to home to home and people began to ask, "What can we do so that children aren't so anxious?" Professionals begin to see that frequent visits have a positive impact on how children feel and behave in foster care.

Professionals also began to have a growing awareness that parents stay engaged in services better when they are able to continue parenting. People began to say, "Maybe it's important for families to have consistent contact." The child welfare system just didn't make that connection before.

Researchers also found out that children were not getting even the minimum amount of visits required by law. In many states, that's only 26 hour-long visits each year—barely more than a day when added all together. But 25% of children weren't

even getting that much time with their families!

Slow to Trickle Down

In New York, our child welfare commissioner issued Visiting Guidelines in 2000 and Commissioner John Mattingly re-issued them again in 2006, and those were huge. The guidelines stressed the importance of visiting for "children's developmental and permanency needs." They said that visits should happen as often as possible with the minimal supervision needed to preserve safety. They said that, whenever possible, visits should be organized around normal family activities, like shopping, outings, haircuts, doctor's appointments and ball games.

The guidelines even stated that children's "seemingly negative reactions to visits may be caused by their attachment to the parent and may actually be the child's way of expressing a desire to spend more time, not less, with the parent."

Still, changes at the top can be very slow to trickle down.

When it comes to babies, we really

Visits should be organized around normal family activities like outings, haircuts and ball games.

have seen changes. Often the worker will now say, "It's a baby, we should have visits three days a week."

People recognize that to maintain a secure attachment, a baby needs to see the parent often. But when the child's older, the default is still too often a two-hour supervised visit once a week.

Fear Hinders Change

Two national visiting innovations, Visit Hosting and Visit Coaching, are making a big difference for families that are able to access these supports.



ILLUSTRATION BY FREDDY BRUCE

Visit Hosting allows people outside the agency to supervise visits. Hosts can be specially trained community members, parents who have reunified with their own children, or a family member or family friend. Visit hosting allows for more and better visits, because the average agency worker doesn't have the time to supervise a lot of visits in the community.

Visit Coaching provides more support. Coaches are trained to help parents have better visits. Some child welfare agencies have put in a tremendous amount of resources to train visit coaches and that's fantastic.

But how often are visit hosts and

coaches used? I'd say probably in about 30% of the cases I see. Because of budget cuts, visit coaching is used on a very limited basis. With visit hosts, a lot of times the worker may be too cautious. Some workers feel, "If I'm not controlling everything something's going to happen."

Most parents are not helped in any way to have their visits go better.

'Why Don't I See You Anymore?'

We see negative visiting practices too often. Families are left in supervised visits for far too long. Sometimes an agency wants a couple of supervised visits to get to know the family. But when there's no thoughtful movement from supervised to unsupervised visits, that's a problem.

Sometimes visits are used like dangling a carrot to get a parent to do what she needs to do. If a parent is not compliant with services, an agency may ask for visits to be decreased or suspended.

When agencies cut visits to punish the parent, it hurts the child. Children don't understand why the visits went from every week to monthly, or none at all. Kids are like, "Why don't I see you anymore?" When children don't see their families, they often start to make up what happened and blame themselves. They may wonder: "What did I do?"

In an ideal world, visiting would start as soon as possible, would occur as often as possible, and, whenever possible, would be organized around normal family activities. This would engage parents from the very beginning and it would help children feel that their attachment to their parent wasn't lost.

Handling the Heartache

After years of relapse and depression, I recovered and reunited with my son.

BY CARON STAFFORD

Before I gave birth to my son Matthew, I was nervous. I was worried about being a single mother (his father was in jail). I had a history of postpartum depression and addiction, and my two older children—Katelyn and Joshua—had been in foster care in Philadelphia for three years. I was also grieving the loss of my father, who died four days before Matthew was born.

But in many ways, my relationship with my father during the last seven months we had together had been an answer to prayer. And in those months, I had overcome addiction and depression and accomplished all of the goals on my service plan. I anticipated that, after Matthew was born, Katelyn and Joshua would come home.

To prepare for Matthew, I had set up mental health outpatient appointments and nurses to come to my house and help me adjust to my newborn. I was also going to meetings to maintain my recovery and was very close to my sponsor. I thought I had all my T's crossed and my I's dotted.

A Depression Like Psychosis

But within days of Matthew's birth, I was placed in the hospital with postpartum depression. My depression felt like a psychotic episode. I heard voices, like angels speaking in my ear. Even after I was discharged, the nurses did not think I was stable enough to take care of Matthew.

For a year, I was a mess. I became really depressed and started to use drugs yet again. I signed away my rights to Katelyn and Joshua because I thought I had used up all my chances to reunify, and I only visited Matthew

once a month. The visits were not easy. Matthew cried the whole time. I had to walk around with him and stay calm doing the "shhhh" sound in his ear until he feel asleep.



ILLUSTRATION BY FRODOAN GARCIA

Tired of Starting Over

Fifteen months after Matthew was placed, I attempted to take my life. I was in the hospital a whole month. It was not fun but I did recover this time. When I came out, I was serious about my recovery. I was tired of relapsing and starting over. I did

I went back to counseling and treatment and educated myself about my rights. Visits were my number one priority because that was what the judge would look at the most. Once again, I started at the lowest level,

one hour every other week supervised at the agency office.

Little moments in my visits kept me going. My son had a great smile, and we had playtime together and read stories. I did what Matthew wanted to do so he could come to trust me. I also liked to bring different foods to see what he liked. He liked cheese and crackers the best, and I would bring Monterey Jack, Colby and Swiss.

Help With Visits

After six months, my worker had to fight with her supervisor to approve a parent aide and increase my visits to once a week for an hour. My parent aide was great help. She would bring Matthew books and puzzles and toys, and she could take us out of the office. This was much better.

We took Matthew to the Discovery Center, a hands-on museum for

or my visit got canceled. I would be so stressed out. I only got to see Matthew once a week! I would get the visit rescheduled, and I would talk about it with my therapist.

Handling Challenges

After four months, I got visits supervised by the parent aide at my apartment. Then we moved on to unsupervised day visits, overnights and weekends.

Still, when Matthew returned home, it was not the same as visiting. Matthew would test me and test me and test me. At moments when I felt overwhelmed, I had to separate myself from him by going in my room and locking my door. He would bang on the door and cry at the top of his lungs, but taking two or three minutes to pray and calm myself helped. Sometimes I had to call on my higher power over a hundred times a day.

I reminded myself that Matthew was going through a big transition. At our visits, he came to see me as his playmate. Plus, he was confused and missing his foster mother. It was going to take time for Matthew to see me as Mommy.

I Stayed Grateful

Despite feeling angry and frustrated, I told myself that I could learn to respond to Matthew in a loving, gentle but firm way. I kept reminding myself, "I will not react to him with the way that I feel." This was not easy to do.

Now our life together is a lot less stressful. My case will be closed very soon—almost three years after Matthew first entered foster. To have Matthew home with me is a blessing. I'm proud that I withstood all the heartache to get him home. It feels tremendous to me to have purpose in my life and to be the mother Matthew needs me to be.

During visits, I did what my son wanted to do so he could come to trust me.

not want my children to remember their mother as a loser drug addict. I wanted them to feel that if Mommy could achieve her dreams, they could achieve theirs too!

children that had a real fire truck, a cockpit of an airplane, a dentist office, and a grocery store. He did not want to leave!

At times, my parent aide was late

Visiting Hours

How to advocate for time with your child.

Vivek Sankaran, clinical assistant professor of law in the Child Advocacy Law Clinic at the University of Michigan, explains how parents can advocate for the best visits possible.

Q: What right do parents have to visits?

A: Every state has different minimum requirements. Most have at least one hour a week. But that's the minimum, not the maximum parents should see a child.

Visits should start immediately after placement. There's no reason that visits should be delayed at all. Parents are entitled to visits unless there's a petition showing that visits, even if supervised, are harmful to a child.

By law, visits should only be supervised when a judge rules that supervision is necessary to protect the child. In practice, it seems like parents usually begin with supervised visits, even if the case is about housing or that the child was left home alone. Before that first hearing, parents should talk to their attorneys about pushing for unsupervised visits, because once the judge orders supervised visits, it tends to just stay that way.

Parents and lawyers have to push back against the notion that visits mean an hour in an office under the supervision of a caseworker. That's probably the worst type of visit I can imagine.

You may be able to propose a creative solution. Maybe the family can find a relative or a family friend to supervise the visits instead of the agency. You will need to prove to the court or the agency that this person is suitable. That includes the person having a criminal background check and a child protective services background check. It's also good to gather whatever you can to show how qualified this person would be. A teacher, a pastor, any folks with more professional background are

more likely to be approved.

Your child's foster parent can also supervise visits. If parents and foster parents don't get along, there's no way a parent can visit at the foster parent's home. But if I were a parent, early on I would try to develop that

Parents and lawyers have to push back against the notion that visits mean an hour in an office under the supervision of a caseworker.

relationship. At first, that might not seem easy. Someone might have told the foster parent something that's not true about you. The foster parent might not even know that she's allowed to have a relationship with the birth parent. Birth parents have the burden of overcoming that.

Q: What can parents do about negative visiting conditions, like overcrowded visiting rooms?

A: I would start with the agency worker and in a calm way explain why you feel conditions are hurting your ability to form a bond. If you don't get anywhere with the worker, speak to higher ups at the local office. If that's unsuccessful, then the parent's attorney should bring the concerns to the court's attention. But I would always try the agency first because courts are very reluctant to micromanage. At a minimum you want to be able to tell the judge that you tried to resolve the issue in other ways.

I would also take pictures. Use a cell phone to take pictures of the surroundings, because a lot of judges and attorneys just haven't seen what these facilities are like.

Q: How often should visits be increased if a parent is progressing?

A: There is no magic number. But usually, visits increase bit by bit. They start at one or two to three times a week. Then the family gets unsupervised visits, then overnight visits. But oftentimes, the system takes cases way too slowly, without enough sense of urgency to increase visits or

return children home.

If your visits are not increasing, talk to the caseworker and the supervisor while talking to your attorney as well. If the agency doesn't cooperate, your attorney can file a motion with court. Another person to talk to is the child's attorney. If an older child wants visits, the parent could encourage the child to call his or her lawyer

and request them.

You also can request the agency's reports on your visits. Parents should have access to anything that doesn't reveal the identity of a reporting source. You should make a written request to the agency and then if the agency doesn't cooperate, file a motion in court.

Finally, you can ask about special visiting supports, like visit coaching with someone who is trained to help families connect during visits. The agency is required to make reasonable efforts to reunify the family. You and your lawyer should characterize these visit supports as the types of reasonable efforts that are needed for reunification to occur.

Above all, make sure that you attend all of your visits, because visits are a huge measure of whether reunification is going to happen, and use your attorneys to push as hard as they can for visits.

Words That Heal

Sometimes it's hard to find the right words to say to your children. Here are some ways to communicate if you are having a hard time getting started.

"I am not sure yet when you can come home but I know I love you and miss you and I am doing everything I can."

"I really miss you and I want to help the foster parent take good care of you while you are away from me."

"It might be hard to talk about everything that is happening but I want to know how you are doing."

"It's OK if you don't want to talk to me, but please talk to someone about what you are thinking."

"I am really frustrated that we can't

have overnight visits yet. I will call my social worker and talk to her about it later."

"I know this is really hard but we will get through this."

"I need to do some things before you can come home but none of this is your fault."

"I know you might be mad at me but you still need to listen and follow rules."

"I am sad to say goodbye to you too. I will see you in a few days and I'll be thinking of you all the time."

Adapted with permission from Family Connect: Putting the pieces of family visits together—a guide for parents published by Family Alternatives: www.familyalternatives.org

'Your Actions Are Setting You Back'

Losing my temper in visits hurt my case.

BY JEANETTE VEGA

In 1999, my 2-year-old son Remi was removed because I hit him and my family called child welfare on me. I was only 17 years old when Remi was born. Remi was an all-over-the-place, running around, never-sitting-still type of kid. It was partially my fault. I spoiled him rotten. I thought that's what I was supposed to do—spoil him and love him to death.

I didn't know that Remi would get so out of control. By age 2, he was defiant and strong-minded. Yes, he was 2, but I think it was more than that—Remi was recently diagnosed with ADHD. Back then, I did not know how to get him to listen. Besides, in my family, we were raised that if you talk back or get out line, you get your ass kicked.

One night while I was in the shower, Remi climbed out of his crib and went out to the sidewalk all by himself. When I saw that he was missing and found him playing outside, I was shocked and scared and I hit him. I immediately regretted it but the damage was done. When my mom and aunt saw the bruises the next day, they called child welfare. Remi was removed and I was arrested.

'I'm Sorry, My Baby'

Our first few visits were rough. The visits were supervised. They felt like jail. The foster mother, a nasty woman in her 30s, usually sat in the visit room along with her three teenagers and the worker. Being watched and told how to talk or play with my own child drove me crazy. I felt so uncomfortable that I just wanted the visits to end. I wanted to see Remi but it felt like there was no space for Remi and me to bond.

I felt as if I'd lost Remi's love and that his foster parents had made me out to be a monster. Remi seemed scared of me. He would hesitate to hug me, or hug me and then go back to the foster mother as if I

would hurt him. It killed me. At those moments, I broke down and cried, apologizing to Remi: "I'm sorry, my baby. Mommy won't ever hurt you again. Life will be better for us."

Most times, Remi was quiet on my

of excitement. Remi's sadness also made it seem like everything I said he had done at home was a lie. He seemed to be a quiet, easy kid.

After a few weeks, Remi began to flip out at the end of visits. It felt good that my baby once again wanted only

Bottled Up

That first year that Remi was in care I had such a hard time.

I was so angry at my family for calling in the case that for a long time I didn't speak to any of them.

Then I lost my grandmother and my big brother, who was my everything. I felt like I was losing everything and everyone. I felt weak and hopeless.

To deal with feeling that others saw me as a child abuser, I put up a front of "I am strong, nothing bothers me." It felt like my only way to get through it all. I feared that if I let myself feel what I was feeling, I might not have the strength to get Remi back.

The only person I let in on my heartbreak was my fiancé. He didn't care how I pushed him away and shut down. He took care of me and guided me to be strong. He truly saved Remi, because I almost could not breathe.

My Pain, My Anger, My Hurt

One day, after Remi had been in care for a year, all the pain and anger I had bottled up came out. Remi came in with stitches on his chin. The foster mother said that he had run into a computer table. At that moment, I freaked out, thinking, "They take him from me for hitting him yet they bring him to me with stitches?" I believed that her teenagers had been playing too rough and the mother had covered it up.

I felt like I had taken all I could take. Remi was only three and helpless to protect himself. I grabbed the foster mother's neck and kept squeezing until the workers took me off. That foster mother felt all my pain, my anger, my hurt.

When I let go, I saw that Remi was scared, and for frightening him I was truly sorry. I told Remi, "I love you



Jeanette with her oldest son, Remi, and Xavier and Zachary.

lap during visits, just hugging me while I whispered to him our song, "You Are My Sunshine." Remi was not playful or happy. Before going into care, he loved playing with his Ninja Turtle toys. I brought a new one to each visit, but he had no reaction

Mom. But it was awful to see him crying even harder than me. How do you explain to a 2 year old, "No, you have to leave with these people. I'll see you next week."

and I am not mad at you. They hurt you and that is a no-no."

I told the worker, "She ain't taking my baby nowhere."

I told the foster mom, "Trust me, I will sleep in front of your house to make sure you don't do anything to him."

The foster mother left, saying, "I am not putting up with this."

After that incident, my unsupervised visits were suspended and the workers gave me anger management classes. I thought, "As if I had no reason to be angry!" I felt that the child welfare system was what made me angry and I felt justified in attacking Remi's foster mom. I was sure that she had hurt my baby and that no one cared.

But my angry reaction got results. Remi was placed with another foster mom. My first impression was that Gladys seemed decent enough. Her kids were grown and she had time to get to know Remi. I was relieved.

Sent Back

A few months later, I was sitting on the floor with Remi, playing "Itsy Bitsy Spider." The worker came in and said, "You should be doing something educational, or reading to him."

"Really, you have the nerve. He is 3 years old! He wants to go outside and run and jump!" I said. I felt they had us like prisoners in that visiting room.

She screamed at me, saying, "You can go. I will cancel your visit if you want to have an attitude."

"Let me bond with my son how we want. Who the hell are you to tell me what he likes and dislikes?" I said. I cursed at her and Remi started crying.

I had just finished one anger management class, but I was sent back to take another.

More Time Together

Luckily, Remi's foster mom saw our pain. I asked Gladys if I could attend Remi's doctor visits, school meetings and therapy, and share his first day of camp. Gladys thought that my son and I belonged together. Though the agency didn't give us more time together, Gladys made it happen!

After school, I would often walk home with them, help Remi with

I did not realize that the workers saw me as someone who would try to fix any situation with hitting.

homework, eat dinner with their family, and even put him to bed. She'd always tell Remi, "You are going home with Mommy soon and you will always be welcome here. You will have two homes when you go back to live with Mom for good."

Gladys loved Remi and made him part of her family. At Christmas, she invited me to come over. Everyone knew him and bought him gifts, and he got hugs and kisses just like the grandkids. It was a great sight but heartbreaking at the same time. I felt like such an outsider. Part of me wanted to snatch him up and say, "They are not your family, I am!" But it was not his fault he ended up there, and I was happy see him in such a loving, caring family.

Are You Serious?

When Remi had been with Gladys for a year (and in foster care for two years), I was almost done with services and was pushing for weekend visits.

Then one day, my latest worker (I had five in all) told me that my fiancé would have to do all the services I'd done before Remi could come home. That was going to take an entire year! I felt so trapped and bad and overwhelmed that I don't even know how to express it.

Soon after, I took Remi on an unsupervised visit to Chuck E. Cheese. He loved it, and I loved it. We had so much fun together. Then I realized that we were 30 minutes late to get back to the agency. I rushed Remi out of there and we took a cab back.

The worker was outside with Gladys and the police. "Oh my God," I thought. "Really? Is it that serious?" The worker said they thought I had taken him and run. She also said that we'd start supervised visits again. I was so frustrated with everything going wrong in my case that I cursed her out.

Can I Speak to You?

This time, my worker pulled me aside. "Can I speak to you?" she said. "I am not here to argue with you. I just want you to understand that your actions are setting you back."

"But I'm sick of people trying to tell me how to live my life and how to act with my son. It's insane," I said.

"It might seem that way now, but in the long run, you can be with your son. Try not show anger when something occurs that frustrates you."

"Everyone thinks that because I'm young they can talk to me like they

want," I told her. "If they want respect, they need to show respect."

"I will try to talk to you in an appropriate manner," she told me.

"I will do my best to keep my cool for Remi's sake," I said.

Up until then, I hadn't really understood how my actions were seen. But it did sink in that I was making things worse for Remi. I decided to try to ignore it when I didn't like the way workers talked to me. I didn't want to be the cause of my son staying in care any longer.

Actions Have Consequences

Looking back now, I realize that the workers saw me as someone who would try to fix any situation with hitting, and my actions did hurt my case. But at 19 years old, I really did not know that telling the workers how I felt would set my case back for months.

I wish that the caseworkers could've seen me as a naïve young mother who was raised in a neighborhood where, if you get tough, you get put in your place. I felt that the workers were testing me and wanted me to fail, and that I needed to show them how tough I could be.

The workers had so much power over me, and I was in such an extreme battle within myself. I really needed them to explain things to me in a reasonable way. Instead, they were quick to judge and took the worst out of me.

Ten years later, I'm no longer a naïve teenage mother. I've learned that the way that you portray yourself in life is how you get treated, and that little mistakes can make a world of difference. As an advocate, I tell other parents to stay cool and collected during visits, and in all their other interactions too.

'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.

Out on the

Visit Hosts help families

BY DAMARIS FIGUEROA

Last year, I signed up to be a Visit Host—someone who can supervise family visits outside of foster care agency visit rooms. Visit Hosts allow families the opportunity to do things that other families do, like eat out and go to activities in their communities. Visit Hosts ensure that the child is safe during visits and write a report about each visit.

Before I was matched with a family, I was afraid that I wouldn't be effective or helpful, and I wasn't sure what the visits would be like.

Exciting Activities

I began hosting visits for a couple and their beautiful 2-year-old daughter. We started out with three-hour visits every Tuesday and Thursday. We did activities

Standing in

How to meet your child's

Visit Coaching supports parents in planning fun visits that help them bond with their children. Here Marty Beyer, who developed Visit Coaching, explains how parents can make the most of family time while their children are in foster care:

One of the most important things for a parent to do during visits is to stand in the child's shoes. Imagine what it's like for your child to be separated from you and to come to the visit, whether they're 2 years old or they're 12 years old. Standing in their shoes, try to imagine: What does my child want from me during our family time?

My child needs me to be fully welcoming. My child needs my full attention in the visit. My child needs praise. Each of my children needs a little "just you, just me" time when we are together. My child needs

reassurance. My child needs me to talk about the next time we will see each other. My child needs a good ending to the visit.

It's often harder to see emotional needs than physical needs. We know to change a wet diaper or to feed our children. But these emotional needs are just as important as feeding a sandwich to your hungry kid.

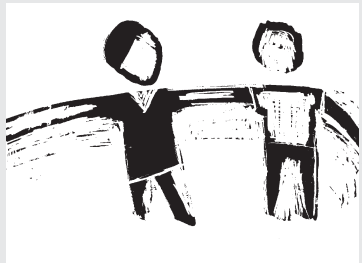
Confusing Feelings

At times, it can be difficult to understand the child's needs. A child might run to a toy as soon as she enters the visit room and not say hello to the parent. Some foster parents or caseworkers might assume that past abuse has made the child afraid of the parent. Actually, it might just be that the child is full of confused feelings during the visit.

Unfortunately, children usually can't explain their feel-

Town

reconnect outside of agency visit rooms.



like eating out at an Italian restaurant and bagel places, visiting the Museum of Natural History and going to the movies and Central Park. The mom was very creative and she would

bring party hats and little horns that we would blow.

It was exciting for the parents and their daughter to visit outside the agency visit room. It was exciting for me, too, because I did things I'd never done before. I saw the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center for the first time, tried scallops at a fancy Chinese restaurant, and went to a parade in Little Italy. Whatever we did, it seemed easier for the family to become closer while seeing new

things and going different places.

Comfortable and Affectionate

Over time, the little girl got comfortable with her family and with me. At first, when we were at a restaurant, she just wanted to run around. But then, she began to talk more and sit still, close to her parents. Soon everything came to be about Mommy and Daddy. If I got to her foster home first on visit days, she would be eagerly waiting for the doorbell to

ring again and her parents to arrive. If she got sleepy during the visit, the little girl would call for Daddy. He would carry her and she would fall asleep on his shoulders or in his arms.

Sad to Say Goodbye

I hope that I will get the chance to be a Visit Host to another family. It makes me sad and angry when I think of how many families have children in foster care and never get to experience positive times with their children outside of visit rooms.

Your Child's Shoes

needs during visits.

ings. A child won't walk in and say, "I'm feeling really confused. Why am I living with someone else and visiting you in an office?" Instead the child might just walk over and start playing with a toy without saying hello. Most children behave their feelings and can't explain them in words.

Unless someone has told the parent in advance that it is fairly common for children to act this way during visits, many parents feel rejected. They might feel disappointed and angry with the child, or believe that the foster parent has set the child against them. That can set the visit off to a bad beginning.

Parents who understand their children's complicated feelings are more able to meet their needs. Parents can say to themselves, "I will go to my child and get on the floor and play even though my child hasn't said hello."

Supporting the Parent

Parents can also request a Visit Coach to help them plan their visits and talk through challenges they might face. The Visit Coach's main

role is to ask parents: "What does your child want from you?"

At first, parents often say, "My child wants to go home." But that's the one need that the parent can't meet. Coaches help parents stand in the child's shoes and think, "What are the child's needs that I can meet?"

Parents might start with physical needs, like being hungry and needing food, or basic emotional needs, like, "My children need to know that I love them." The Coach's role is to ask, "Well, what would make your child feel that you love them? What are the fun things that you did with your child before placement?"

Making a Connection

Coaches can also help parents think about developmental needs. If a child is developing speech, the child needs to practice talking during visits. If the child is in elementary school, the child needs to tell the parent about friends and what they're doing in school.

The most important thing during visits is to get a back-and-forth going with your children, whether that's through singing a song, giving raspberries on the belly during the diaper change, smiling at each other, playing

that special connection.

Focus on Bonding

Visit Coaches can also help parents avoid one of the most common mistakes: using the visit time to talk with agency workers about their case. Parents do this because they feel that the top priority is to communicate with someone who can help with their case. But when parents use visits to talk with other adults, caseworkers worry that the parent is not interested in the child.

It's very sad for parents to think, "My child needs me to work hard to build our relationship while my child is in foster care." That's painful because no one wants to believe that a child's connection to her parent is fragile.

But a few weeks or months is a long time for a child to be apart from a parent. A child's attachment to the parent is like a flower—you have to water it regularly and give it sun.



ILLUSTRATION BY OCEN DOLINA

a game, or talking about school. With little kids, you might push cars around on the floor. Taking pictures, doing art, and even painting fingernails can be a time to listen to your child talk about their lives and a way to make

Closer Than Ever

I'm learning how to handle my children without getting high.

BY SANDRA EVANS

When I was 12, drugs became my way to numb out all the ugly feelings I had inside from being molested and ignored by my mother, who always put men ahead of her children. Eventually I tried meth and became addicted. Those painful childhood memories, the ones that no one talks about, disappeared with meth.

My addiction escalated when I was about 25 and caring for my four children under age 5. My husband, Francisco, and I lived in a neighborhood where at every fourth house they either used meth or sold it. Soon getting high became my escape from the smallest things—my baby crying, or a fight with Francisco.

Totally Numb

Thinking back, I see a number of things that triggered me to start using so much. Francisco was going to school, which left me home alone all day. I found caring for all of our children overwhelming and was jealous that Francisco was bettering his life.

I feared that I did not know how to be a mom. I always made sure my children were fed and bathed. We would read together and go to the park. But I was also really afraid of making all the mistakes that my mother had made with me.

My addiction made my parenting worse. I was always frustrated with my children and Francisco. I would yell at my oldest, who was only 5, "Make Emiliano a bottle" or, "Take care of your brothers." Other times I did what I had to do but with no emotion, just numb.

When I got pregnant again, I needed and wanted to quit. I would tell myself, "This hit will be the last," but I kept using.

No More Hiding

Francisco knew I had used meth socially, but I hid my addiction from him. Then we went to the hospital because I felt like I was going into labor. I hadn't gotten prenatal care, so the doctor did all sorts of tests. He told us that I had tested positive for meth.

I felt that Francisco hated me. I felt betrayed that we were in a room full of people passing judgment on me, and I felt like a terrible mom, and my husband wasn't backing me up. I now realize that he was looking out for the welfare of our children and for me.

Rebuilding My Family

Through treatment, I also got to connect with my family in a much different way than I had when I was high. Francisco and our children came to visit on Saturdays. I would play with our kids, read to them, color and really enjoy our time. These were things I hadn't done with my children before.

Being in the program with my daughter was a wonderful experience, too. I was able to enjoy taking care of her. We had a class called Therapeutic Childcare that gave us time and support to bond with our babies. The teacher, Ms. V., gave me confidence that, despite my childhood, I could raise my children without neglecting them.

Ms. V. taught us little things that can set the foundation to connect with your children. For instance, I used to make a bottle, put my baby in the bed, prop up the bottle with a blanket, and that was that. She told me that propping the bottle can make a baby choke, get ear infections, and have trouble learning to stop eating when she is full. Most important, feeding the baby in your arms is a way you show the baby you love and care about her.



ILLUSTRATION BY JESSICA DEBAG

The next night, I gave birth.

At the hospital, child protective services showed up and told us we couldn't take the baby home. That day, I went to the nursery to hold my daughter, who was no longer allowed in my room. I just looked at her, feeling like the worst mother in the world.

Feeling Betrayed

We also went to a meeting at the CPS office. The workers suggested that I go to an outpatient treatment program so I could be with my family while I got help. But Francisco insisted I go to in-patient outside of our neighborhood, where he knew I would have an easier time breaking my habit.

A Little Bit of Hope

Soon I was admitted to Westlake, where I stayed with my newborn daughter for six months.

I wanted to yell at my son, 'What the hell is wrong with you?' But I told myself, 'That isn't the kind of parent you want to be.'

In treatment, I met a lot of women that I could relate to because we'd been through similar experiences. My counselor, Sharon, also helped me so much. From the instant she looked at me, I felt that she got me. The loneliness that I had felt for so long began to lift in her presence.

Attention and Consistency

I learned that children thrive when you're consistent and have a daily schedule. Ms. V. told me it's important to get up early with my children, get them dressed and eat breakfast together. She reminded me to hold my children, tell them I love them, praise them when they do something

good, and stick with a punishment once I have set it.

The most valuable thing I learned was that I needed to set aside time to give my children the attention they craved. I didn't realize that children need attention in order to thrive.

One Saturday near the end of my treatment, Francisco picked me up to take our children to the zoo. I was thrilled. I had always wanted to do that. I'll never forget the expressions on our children's faces while they looked at the animals. It felt incredible to me that we could experience such joy as a family.

'Can I Do It?'

The day I returned home, I was filled with joy but also terrified. I thought, "What if I can't do it? What if my kids hate me?"

I had spent six months with only my daughter in the safe, structured environment of the program. I feared that I wasn't ready for the real world.

A big moment for me came about a month after I returned home. My case-worker, Geneva Thomas, came by for our weekly visit and my 4 year old started acting up. First he threw a ball at her. Immediately, I got on him and told him to stand in the corner. He told me no and continued to throw things.

I knew he was just trying to get attention, so I decided to ignore him. But Geneva saw that I was getting frustrated. "You need to deal with him," she said.

A Sober Mom

I picked my son up and told him to stand in the corner. He started to shout. Then I

was so embarrassed. I wanted to yell at him, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

But that was the old me. I told myself, "That isn't the kind of parent you want to be." So I sat down with him in the corner. I told him we were going to sit there until we calmed down.

It felt like a good solution to me, but Geneva said I was punishing myself by sitting there with him. I felt so frustrated and confused. Even though it took a lot of work, I finally got my son to stand in time-out by himself.

Handling My Children

Now it's been 18 months since I came home from treatment. I feel good. I know how to build a foundation for my children. I am learning to handle their outbursts in a positive way and am reaching out to Francisco for support.

I'm so glad my social worker didn't just throw me out into the world when I was done with treatment. Even after my case was closed, she was there if I had a problem or question.

Now, through a program called Exceptional Parents Unlimited, a child development expert comes and works with my children and me once a week. She brings games for the kids to play or projects for us to do together, like baking or making our own Christmas ornaments. It helps to strengthen the bond between my children and me.

Francisco and I are also closer than ever. We are able to communicate without fighting. I feel that we can make it through everything and our love will not fade.

The Comforts of Home

Visits at the agency felt like jail.

BY DION JALEN BUIE

When my sister and I went into foster care, we were placed separately. She went to a group home and I went to a foster home. We would go to the agency to visit with my mother every Wednesday. I was really glad to see them, and I wished we saw each other more than once a week.

At first, I didn't enjoy the visits because the agency felt like jail. The big tables and rolling chairs made it seem like we were in a conference room, and with other visits going on it could be very noisy.

A few months later, I was placed with an aunt in the Bronx and my sister got placed with another aunt in Harlem. Our schools were only 10 blocks apart, though, so on Wednesdays, my uncle and I would go pick my little sister up from school together, and we three would go over to the agency and visit my mother.

I liked these visits better. We would sit in a cubicle that we had to ourselves, and the social worker wouldn't bother us. It was better because no one else was around. My uncle was there and the four of us would talk about the situation and my mother would help us with our homework.

Talk, Dance, Laugh

Then they moved my sister to my grandmother's in the Bronx, near where I lived. I could go visit her at my grandmother's house and even spend the weekends. I felt great. My grandmother's house is very comforting because that's where I grew up.

The decision also meant I got to be around my mother more. My mom now lives in Pennsylvania but she takes the bus to come see my sister and me two or three times a month. She visits when my sister and I are both at my grandmother's house.

We get along better when we're not being watched by other people. Plus, during these



visits, I don't feel like I'm in foster care. My family is positive, and everyone isn't so stressed out about this situation.

Seeing my mother and my sister raises my spirits. My sister and I talk and dance when we get together. We also go outside and we laugh and joke. When my mom visits us we talk to her about everything, and she buys us things and we just have a nice time. Sometimes it feels like I'm living with her again and we are just visiting my grandmother.

Brighten It Up

My experience shows me that agencies should change the way they do visits. Whenever it's possible, agencies should bring the children to the family's house for visits. In a family member's house, you can be relaxed.

If a visit has to be at an agency or group home, they should change the way the rooms are set up to give people privacy.

Agencies should also increase the amount of time kids can spend with their family. If you are separated from your family, why would they only give you two hours to visit? I would give at least four hours, two or three days a week.

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'Let Me Handle This'

I support my wife and daughter during visits.

BY HERBERT MORALES

Not long ago, my daughter got in trouble during class. My wife told me about it over the phone. I could hear Tyler saying in the background, "But it wasn't my fault." To defuse my wife's anger, I told her, "Let me handle it this weekend during our visit."



ILLUSTRATION BY STEFAN VAUBEL

My wife and daughter visit me at Sing Sing, a maximum security prison in upstate New York. During our visits, Tyler tells me about school and her friends and I sit in rapt attention. I bring the Bible or another book, and Tyler reads to me. She's an excellent reader. We also thumb wrestle at every visit, which gets quite intense.

'Tell Me What Happened'

When Tyler arrived that weekend, I could tell that she expected a harsh punishment. Instead of giving me a hug and a kiss, she remained seated with her head down.

I felt that Tyler needed guidance, not tough love. I wanted to calm her down so I began by asking, "How was the train ride?" Sure enough, she was soon as talkative as usual.

I broached the subject of her disciplinary problem by saying, "Tell me what happened at school." I thought this was a fresh approach.

An Outburst in Class

Tyler explained that she had been working on the computer but a couple of boys kept bothering her. She asked them to leave her alone, but they persisted. She got upset and yelled, "Could you please stop and leave me alone?"

The teacher had been tutoring another student and was unaware of any problem. When she heard Tyler's outburst, she instructed Tyler to turn off her computer and leave the room. Tyler became very emotional and said, "But I didn't do anything!" Again, the teacher told her to go outside, and she called home.

Getting It Straight

When Tyler was finished, I said, "So let me get this straight" and I repeated her whole story back to her slowly, ending with: "So your teacher sees you turned around in your chair, shouting, with your headphones off, and the rest of the kids facing their computers and quiet."

Tyler nodded very slowly.

"Sweetie, don't you see why the teacher would blame you?"

I advised her that, in the future, she should ask the teacher for help. I also explained that if she tried to see the other person's point of view, it would help her understand the problem.

A Proud Father

"Now, as for your punishment..." I began dramatically, "you are to inform your teacher if someone is bothering you and you feel like screaming."

Tyler hugged me saying, "I love you. You always explain things to me."

I felt so proud as a father at that moment. Even though I am in prison, I have taken a parenting class for fathers and am trying my hardest to raise Tyler well. My own upbringing was harsh and I had no one who could help me think about my experiences and make good decisions. Despite my sentence, I can support my wife, teach my daughter and show my love during visits.