Delaware
Visit Host Guidelines

Final Version
December, 2017

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Visit Host Guidelines

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Background

Family severance at the outset of placement in foster care is considered one of the most traumatic experiences a child can face. Research indicates that upon entering foster care, children may endure symptoms of trauma, emotional and mental distress, as well as neurological and physiological reactions to the abrupt change.[1] Evidence further supports the notion that visitation occurring in a relaxed, familial setting brings about more meaningful interaction, which helps to maintain the parent-child bond and, ultimately, works to promote permanency.[2] According to the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) Enhanced Resource Guidelines, visitation is an important element of family engagement, as it can "promote healthy attachment and reduce the negative impact of separation for both the child and the family."[3] Referring to visitation as "family time," the Enhanced Resource Guidelines note that family time has been called the "heart of permanency planning," with research showing that stable and quality visitation "increases the likelihood of an expeditious reunification."[4]

When it comes to a parent's case plan, the "visitation" element often evokes the most excited and enthusiastic response – for both parent *and* child. The visitation component allows an opportunity for a parent and child to experience a sense of connectedness despite the recent trauma that has been experienced. Following the long list of services and tasks a parent must complete in order to achieve reunification comes the section the most familiar – and the most meaningful.

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[1] "Developmental Issues for Young Children in Foster Care," Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Vol. 106 (2000). (http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/106/5/1145, last accessed Sept. 6, 2017).
[2] Rose Marie Wentz, "Visitation – The Key to Children's Safety, Permanency and Well-being" National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (2012) (https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/conf/Visitation_Key_Children's_Safety_Permanency_Well-Being_2012.authcheckdam.pdf, last accessed Sept. 6, 2017).
[3] Gatowski S. Miller, N., Rubin, S. Escher, P. & Maze, C. *Enhanced Resource Guidelines: Improving court practice in child abuse and neglect cases* (Reno: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2016), 141.
[4] Gatowski et al., 141.

Visitation is addressed by the Division of Family Services itself within the Policy User Manual (hereinafter, the "Manual").[5] In its current version, the Manual directs that visitation shall be arranged as a result of a "Visitation Agreement," which is to be "developed jointly by the caseworker and the parents or guardians, and in consultation with the child attorney, the child's tribe if the child is an Indian child, the child's foster parents, and, where appropriate, the child. The Visitation Plan shall be clearly documented in both the Family Service Plan and the Child Plan."[6] The Division's own guidelines instruct that "[i]deally, visits should involve parents in routine activities of parenting, such as attending the child's school functions, special occasions and medical check-ups."[7] Further, the guidelines direct that "[t]he caseworker, in conjunction with the parents, determines the location of the visit. Visits may take place in the family home; foster home, DFS office, recreational or other areas suitable for the purpose of the visit. It is important to find ways for the parent and child to have *natural interactions*."[8] Lastly, the Division's guidelines instruct that visitation shall be supervised or monitored *if necessary*, such as where a parent presents a significant safety concern or there is an articulable reason why supervision is warranted.[9]

The Visit Host Guidelines Workgroup recognizes the family-centric approach outlined by the Division's Manual and would like to ensure that day-to-day practice reflects what is described in policy. It is still common practice for visits to occur in the Division's visitation room, heavily supervised by a case worker and/or family interventionist during traditional, daytime hours during the weekdays. In addition, the Court Improvement Program (CIP) conducted a small study in 2016 of 41 CIP cases and found that visitation was not always happening by the Adjudicatory Hearing.

[5] Division of Family Services, User Manual (August, 2017) (http://kids.delaware.gov/policies/dfs/fs-user-manual.pdf, last accessed Sept. 7, 2017).
[6] *Id.*, 102.
[7] *Id.*, 103.
[8] *Id.*
[9] *Id.*, 102.

In particular, visitation occurred by the Adjudicatory Hearing with mothers in 61% of cases and with fathers in 32% of cases. While this was a small sample, the data revealed opportunities for improvement. Knowing how critical visitation is for reunification, it was recommended at the conclusion of this study that child welfare stakeholders work collectively to improve efforts at ensuring visitation begins very soon after a child is placed in foster care.

Opportunities for parents and children to engage in more normal family activities with their children (*e.g.*, recreational events, school plays, back-to-school nights) can be offered more frequently. Moreover, one recent study suggested that visitation in a Division visitation room may be the *least* reliable venue in which to make a critical assessment about familial bonding and attachment.[10] Finally, and perhaps most notable, is that the notion of evening and weekend visitation is virtually unattainable – and parents often struggle to balance employment, case planning and family visitation between regular Monday through Friday business hours.

In response, the concept of a Visit Host has emerged in several jurisdictions to help break down some of these barriers. Given the burgeoning evidence that visitation arrangements greatly influence the quality of visits, it stands to reason that implementing the innovative Visit Host concept can not only help improve the parent-child interaction during the traumatic out-of-home placement experience, but can work to expedite the path to permanency.

[1010] Wendy Height, *et al*., *Understanding and Supporting Parent-Child Relationships During Foster Care Visits: Attachment Theory and Research, Social Work*, April 2003, Vol. 8, Num; Sonja J. Leathers, *Parental Visiting and Family Reunification: Could Inclusive Practice Make a Difference?*, Child Welfare, July/August 2002, Vol. LXXXI, Num. 4; White, Mary Ellen, Albers, Erick Bitonti, Christine, *Factors in Length of Foster Care: Worker Activities and Parent-Child Visitation,*" Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, June 1996, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, pp. 75-84.

Visit Host Workgroup Goals

The goals of the Visit Host Guidelines Workgroup are as follows:

1. Engage leadership/representatives from key child welfare stakeholders including: the Division of Family Services, Office of the Child Advocate, parent attorneys, child welfare provider agencies, foster parents, the Department of Justice and Family Court, to discuss practical, family-centered and developmentally appropriate ways for parents and children to visit in a natural and safe environment as they experience foster care.
2. Create Visit Host Guidelines. These guidelines cannot answer every question that may arise in working with individual families, and each situation is unique. However, these guidelines are meant as a reference and tool for the exploration and implementation of this promising practice.
3. Pilot and implement the Visit Host Guidelines throughout Delaware. The workgroup and the leadership within the Division of Family Services will decide how best to implement these guidelines in light of their current practice.

Introduction

High-caseloads, insufficient resources, lack of available family interventionists: all commonly-cited barriers to implementing frequent and *quality* visitation between parent and child. The innovative practice of engaging a Visit Host into the equation offers a potential solution to these barriers – assuming the case is an appropriate candidate and a suitable Visit Host is identified. The following guidelines are intended to assist the Division, family interventionist agencies, and foster care agencies in recruiting and integrating the Visit Host model into routine family visiting practice for children in out-of-home care.

What is a Visit Host?

A Visit Host is someone identified by the family (including the parents, youth, or other relatives) or by the Division, or provider agencies[11], who can monitor family visits for children with their parents and siblings ***in lieu of*** the case worker or family interventionist. In the beginning of a case, it is expected that the assigned case worker will be present for the first few visits. The goal in doing this is to ensure a safe and smooth transition for the child, parents and Visit Host. However, as a case progresses, it is anticipated that the assigned case worker's participation in visits will be infrequently needed. The use of a Visit Host is a promising approach because:

- Safe reunification is predicated on frequent and high-quality visitation (in appropriate cases);
- Visits that are high-spirited and fun permit a family to feel supported. Further, this model promotes visitation within normal family activities;
- Children enduring a stay in foster care experience a sense of overall well-being, and may adjust more smoothly to the transition;
- Frequent and meaningful visitation empowers parents, and may motivate parents to increase their case planning efforts;
- Provides supervision, while allowing the family to visit outside of the Division's office;

[11] Throughout this document, whenever the 'Division' is referenced herein, it will indicate both the 'Division' and the contracted, provider foster care agencies.

- Allows for evening and/or weekend visitation.

As these guidelines will illustrate in greater detail, a Visit Host is someone who can not only assure the safety of the child(ren) involved, but is also invested in the well-being of the child(ren). A suitable Visit Host is both supportive of the parent and the family's attempts to reunify, but cognizant of the issues giving rise to the situation in the first place – and will therefore not hesitate to report inappropriate conduct during a visit.

Visit Hosts can help promote family unity by accompanying the family in settings that are more comfortable than a visitation room, and can bring families together more frequently and for longer periods of time than a case worker or family interventionist who are both responsible for a large number of families on their respective caseloads.

The use of Visit Hosts is common practice in child welfare; however, expectations are different. In Delaware, the understanding is that a Visit Host is identified by family members and that these individuals are unpaid supports to families. There will also be some arrangements where Visit Hosts may be able to occasionally transport children to assist with visits. Transportation protocols will be discussed further with Visit Hosts during training and orientation.

These guidelines will serve as a reference in recruiting, assessing and training Visit Hosts in order to provide more frequent, consistent and rewarding visits for children and their families.

What Situations are Appropriate for a Visit Host?

Of course, not every case will lend itself naturally to the use of a Visit Host. However, there are a multitude of situations in which a Visit Host can enable families to spend more productive and meaningful time together. While this practice makes the most sense for families with a goal of reunification, Visit Hosts may also be appropriate where reunification is not the goal but a child's connections to family remains important. Visit hosts can be integrated at any point during the life of the case, and any of the following situations may be ideal for the consideration of a Visit Host:

- Large sibling groups where all children involved are not placed in the same foster home;
- Sibling groups, even in circumstances when parents are not able to attend visits;
- Older teenagers, regardless of the permanency goal, who wish to spend more time with one another, parents, extended family, or others identified by the youth;
- Families for whom the visitation plan should progress to more natural, less closely supervised visits – which will ultimately transition to unsupervised visits;
- Families for whom more frequent visits outside the Division are appropriate, but the Division lacks resources to facilitate such visits;
- Families who can easily identify individuals with whom they would like to spend time as a family outside the Division;
- Families who can easily identify places the family would enjoy visiting together;
- Families who can easily identify activities and events that would be meaningful to them, provided the case worker feels participation would be helpful;
- Families in which a parent is isolated, and a Visit Host could play an important role in building a support network for that parent;
- Families struggling with homelessness – or otherwise lack appropriate housing or space in which to spend time together.

How to Identify a Visit Host

In many cases, the best starting point when considering a Visit Host is to simply ask the parents and youth if they have any suggestions as to who may be willing to host visitation. Speaking with the parents at the outset of the case about both their extended family members and other non-relatives to include will undoubtedly yield useful results. As well, relying on the youth and family members to identify key players in the child's life is also an important initial step in identifying a suitable Visit Host. For example, relatives who would like to be involved in the process of reunifying the family – but are unable to serve as a foster care resource – are often good candidates. Likewise, explore places and activities that are important to the family, including sports (*e.g.*, coaches), guidance counselors, teachers, faith-based community participants, or local community groups. These resources may reveal individuals who are genuinely invested in the wellness of the family, and would be willing to serve in the Visit Host position in order to provide additional visitation opportunities. Moreover, a Visit Host selected from one of these groups will likely know the family on a personal level, and can draw from that experience and background to better support the family.

The Division may partner with the family in identifying a suitable Visit Host. The Division may explore volunteers who are active in the case such as prior adoptive parents, or even prior clients who have achieved successful reunification. Understanding the background of these individuals will be important in determining how they can best support the family. While these individuals are not initially known to the family, these options can offer support and connections for families who may otherwise be isolated and in need of a greater support network.

The proper time to identify a Visit Host can vary from case to case. Use of a Visit Host could be explored at a Team Decision Making meeting (TDM), or any other time when case

planning is discussed with the family. Ideally, a TDM meeting is a good opportunity to gather information about a family and discuss who can support the family in various capacities. Case workers and other professionals involved in TDMs should utilize this opportunity to think expansively of Visit Host possibilities. A discussion around use of a Visit Host should undoubtedly occur simultaneously whenever the case worker reviews the level or type of supervision that is necessary for a family. Questions to ask in the effort to identify potential Visit Hosts could include:

- Who are the people who are important to you and have been important and supportive to you and your family?
- Does your child have a godparent or other close adult relationships?
- With whom did your child spend time prior to entering care?
- Are there people in your community who are familiar with your child, and who you trust and feel are supportive and reliable?
- For the youth: Who did you spend time with prior to entering foster care? Would you feel safe if this person were at a visit with you and your parents? Who are other adults you like or respect?

Criteria for Selecting an Appropriate Visit Host

The paramount responsibility of a Visit Host is to ensure the safety and well-being of the child at all times. Of course, Visit Hosts are not typically trained experts in child development, and the concept is meant to encourage a natural, familial atmosphere. However, in every case, everyone must work to determine if the proposed Visit Host is reliable and willing to work with the Division to support visitation, while simultaneously respecting and attending to the concerns the Division may have in a particular case. In addition, during Visit Host training and orientation there will be some discussion around common child development behavior that can be expected during times of transition. Strategies for hosts on how best to support children and families during these transitional times will be discussed during orientation and training.

The following is a list of general criteria to review with each potential Visit Host, and is meant to guide Division case workers in making a thorough assessment:

The Visit Host is, first and foremost, a responsible adult who:

- Has a connection to the family or is identified by the Division as someone who has demonstrated a commitment to supporting family reunification and togetherness;
- Is willing and able to host visits on an ongoing basis;
- Is willing to accommodate a DFS worker, CASA or child attorney into their home to observe the visits on occasion.
- Is willing to maintain consistent contact with the Division, and is willing to respond to the Division's inquiries in a timely manner;
- Will intervene immediately and appropriately if any problem occurs during a visit, and is willing to report any problems to the Division;
- Agrees to be honest and forthcoming about the quality and content of visits, including providing testimony at court proceedings;
- Is knowledgeable about the original placement circumstances, ongoing family issues, and current goals of the family;
- Is invested in helping the family to have a safe, productive and positive visit;
- Is willing to participate in a home assessment (if relevant), interview process, and background check;
- Is willing to discuss any of his or her own relevant Division history;
- Is willing to participate in training or orientation to learn more about the responsibilities of being a visit host or to learn how to meet the family's needs during a visit;

- Is willing to sign an agreement as to the above expectations prior to engaging as a Visit Host.
- Is willing to attend Court hearings on an as needed basis.

Communication with Visit Hosts

Outlining clear lines of communication at the beginning of the relationship will help Visit Hosts feel supported and that they can properly support families. The assigned Division or provider case worker to the family should make contact with the Visit Host and allow the hosts to know the frequency in which they can anticipate contact. For example, in the beginning of a case, the assigned case worker may make an initial face-to-face contact with the Visit Host and then follow up with a weekly phone call to hear how the visits are progressing. The assigned worker should be sure to provide their contact information to the Visit Host and discuss mutually agreeable times to discuss how visits are going.

The assigned case worker should identify some scenarios to the Visit Host as to what may require immediate contact about the family and what can require routine, ongoing communication. When the assigned case worker is preparing for an important permanency planning meeting at the Division or a Court proceeding the worker should allow the Visit Host to know if her/his presence will be required either via phone or in person.

Discussing Boundaries and Expectations With the Parent, Child & Visit Host Candidate

Most often, when a parent proposes someone to host a visit, that person will be at least somewhat familiar with the history and dynamics of the family – including some of the circumstances giving rise to the Division obtaining custody. Many relatives and community supports, for example, were close to the family prior to the Division's involvement, and it may be just this intimate relationship that makes the proposed Visit Host a good candidate in the first instance. However, this is not *always* the case, and a private discussion should occur with parents ahead of time with regard to how much the proposed Visit Host knows about the underlying child welfare care. Confidentiality must be highly regarded, and parents should always be given the option of sharing information with the Visit Host at their discretion. Likewise, the case worker and parent should come to an agreement as to how much information needs to be shared with the Visit Host at the outset.

Prior to considering a potential Visit Host (and certainly prior to meeting with a candidate), the Division should be sure to discuss with the parent that any information pertinent to the child's safety shall be shared with the Visit Host. Advise the parent that this may include some or all of the allegations that resulted in a finding of dependency/neglect. For example, the Division may want to share with the proposed Visit Host that the case involved substance abuse, and that the Division will expect sobriety during visitation. Of course, the Division will need the parent's expressed consent to release this information if the proposed Visit Host is unfamiliar with the history. It is best for the case worker to ensure that they have received the parent's willingness and approval to move forward with a Visit Host. The Division will have an internal process in place that will outline what will be required to have parental consent for a Visit Host.

Children, particularly older children, may be able to propose a Visit Host. It is important for the Division to communicate with the child that he or she will have an opportunity to confidentially discuss how visits are going with the Visit Host – and that the visitation arrangement can be altered if at any point the child feels uncomfortable.

How to decide whether someone is an appropriate proposed Visit Host will vary with each circumstance. At a minimum, always have at least one meeting with the proposed Visit Host, and one meeting with the parent and proposed Visit Host. It may also be appropriate to include the child(ren) in at least one meeting. The meetings should include a strengths-based component for all parties – parents and children alike – detailing the ways in which the case has progressed positively since the outset.

A discussion with a proposed Visit Host should not only include the above-listed criteria and questions, but should include the expectation that background checks will be performed – including a review of the Child Protection Registry, DELJIS, and child protective services history check with the Division. If the Visit Host is out-of-state, the Division will follow up with additional screening questions to ensure applicable out-of-state and national registries are checked.

Use of hypothetical situations may be helpful in determining whether a proposed Visit Host can adequately address problems and issues that may come up. Proposed hypotheticals could touch upon issues of child safety, inappropriate conduct by a parent, or suspicions of intoxication. Additional activities to include in an assessment could include:

- Asking the proposed Visit Host to attend current visits in order to observe interactions between the candidate and the child(ren);
- Requesting references;
- Asking the candidate to speak with Visit Hosts working on other cases.

Approving a Visit Host

The following section describes a series of steps to follow prior to approving a Visit Host. This list is not exhaustive, and additional steps may be added by the case worker depending upon the unique facts and dynamics in the particular case. As a starting point, the following should be considered:

- **Obtain a Child Protective Services Clearance**: It is critical to determine whether the Visit Host candidate has ever had allegations of abuse or neglect made against him or her. The mere existence of a Child Protection Registry history should not *automatically* preclude the person from hosting visits. Rather, as is the case with potential foster parents, it should be one factor that the Division uses to determine if the candidate is appropriate. The Division should consider how much time has passed since the report, as well as the nature of the allegations.
- **Criminal Background**: A review of a candidate's DELJIS history, if any, should be viewed with discretion as one factor. In the event a candidate maintains a criminal history, the Division should consider the length of time since the offense, the nature of the conviction, and the candidate's compliance with any sentencing conditions.
- **Orientation and Training**: Orientation and training for a Visit Host can be informal, such as an individual meeting between the candidate and the Division to discuss expectations. If several cases are prime for Visit Host involvement, a group training session may be most efficient. In particular, a Visit Host needs to understand what he or she is expected to do if a child's safety or well-being appears to be at risk during a visit.
- **Home Assessment**: If the Visit Host plans to conduct visits in his or her home, the Division should conduct the home safety assessment of a potential placement resource. This is

particularly important if the candidate is hoping to host extended or overnight visits. If other adults are residing in the home, a Child Abuse Registry check should be completed for those individuals as well. Typically, the Visit Host is the primary adult responsible for monitoring the visit and no other adults should be at the visit without the Division's knowledge and parent's consent. However, there may be exceptional circumstances when other adults are present for the visit. This should be clearly discussed with the Division and parents prior to the visit happening and parents should agree to the circumstances.

- **Written Agreement**: It is best to memorialize a written agreement to clarify ground rules of the visit and provide guidance for both the Visit Host and parents. These agreements can also help defend the Division's decision to stop the Visit Host arrangement if necessary.
- **Court Participation**: It may be necessary for the Visit Host to participate in some of the ongoing Court proceedings. The purpose of this participation is to provide the Court with specific details as to the parent's interactions, strengths and areas for improvement. A discussion should occur, perhaps during the training period, as to the expectations to participate in the court hearing process – as well as what to expect during the hearings and how to adequately prepare.
- **Transportation**: If a Visit Host is going to transport a child for a visit, the expectation is that the Visit Host will possess a driver's license and vehicle insurance. In addition, age-appropriate car seats/seatbelts should always be utilized during the transport.

Orientation & Training

Every case will be different in terms of the level of orientation or training needed before the Visit Host can begin supporting the family during visits. As suggested, the Division may accomplish this during case planning meetings that also include the parent and child (where appropriate). It is valuable to make your expectations about the visits as clear as possible with the Visit Host and parent sitting together. Certainly, the Visit Host must know what steps the Division expects if a visit is not going well, up to and including, ending a visit. In advising the Visit Host, the Division may want to draw on expectations and guidance provided to kinship foster parents who have visits in the home with a child's parents.

The assigned case worker could be present for the first few visits that take place with the host as a means to identify additional issues that may be important for assuring a safe, productive, positive visit for the family. This level of case worker involvement will vary for each specific case. Over the life of a case, it is recommended that the caseworker be present with the Visit Host from time to time to assess the arrangement. The Division should also regularly check in with the Visit Host to find out about the progress of visits, as well as to address any of the host's concerns. Less frequent check-ins should be possible as the case progresses, if visits continue to go well. It may also be pertinent to interview children separately regarding their experience during visits in the event it is warranted to receive the child's input.

Training should occur with a Visit Host and will occur with either the Division worker, supervisor or provider worker. An informal training discussion should occur with the Visit Host and cover the following topics:

1. Safety – Visit Hosts must be aware that safety is a priority during the visit and be aware as to what an appropriate environment for the child and family would look like.

2. Scenario-Based Discussions – Visit Hosts should be aware of potential scenarios that may arise during visits and how to potentially manage them in the moment or through follow up with a professional involved in supporting the family.
3. Confidentiality – An overview of confidentiality should be discussed with the Visit Hosts so that they are aware as to what information is relevant for them to know and what information is appropriate to share with others.
4. Court Processes & Expectations – Visit Hosts should understand that the Family Court is involved and receive an overview as to what types of hearings may occur throughout the case. Visit Hosts should be informed that they may be asked to attend, as needed.
5. Documentation & Reporting – Visit Hosts should be aware of what information is required from them after the visit is conducted. At a minimum, Visit Hosts will need to document the dates, times and parties who attended the visits.

At the conclusion of the training conversation with the Visit Host an overview document that outlines the expectations of a Visit Host will be distributed. This document will provide clarity to the Visit Host and will serve as an acknowledgement that the Visit Host understands the expectations outlined.

Documentation

Even while engaging a Visit Host, the Division remains responsible for documenting reasonable efforts around all service planning, including visits. It is not necessary nor is it recommended that Visit Hosts formally document their activities while supporting a visit. However, the Division will advise around what standard documentation is needed for tracking the dates, times and parties present at each visit. It is necessary for the case worker to regularly touch base with a Visit Host to get feedback on the visits and to include that feedback in regular progress notes and service plans. Just as a caseworker regularly hears from caregivers about visits that take place under their "supervision," caseworkers should make provisions to solicit feedback from the Visit Host, either after every visit or at regular intervals.

Visit Hosts do need to understand that in the event of a conflict or question regarding the accuracy of their feedback, a caseworker may temporarily or permanently halt the arrangement until the conflict is resolved. This should be indicated in any Visit Host agreement. Naturally, progress notes should reflect any feedback from parents and children.

In the event the Visit Host opts to keep a log of visits, ensure that the parents and child(ren) are also afforded the opportunity to record their impressions and feedback.

Conclusion

With proper exploration and application, Visit Hosts offer a promising approach to improving family visits, meeting the needs of children and families in foster care, and a family's reliable network of support. For the reasons set forth in these Guidelines, the Division is strongly encouraged to integrate Visit Hosts into standard practice, where appropriate, as well as rely upon the various best practices described throughout.