

Visitation Overview

“Research shows that regular, frequent visitation increases the likelihood of successful reunification, reduces time in out-of-home care, promotes healthy attachment, and reduces the negative effects of separation for the child and the parent.”

- Margaret Smariga, ABA Center on Children and the Law

Frequent, quality, age-appropriate visitation is vital to establishing, repairing or maintaining a healthy child/parent relationship. A healthy child/parent relationship is vital to safe reunification. Safe reunification is typically, in all but the most serious of cases, a child’s initial permanency goal.

One of the first considerations made by courts, in addition to safety, is the establishment of a meaningful parent/child visitation plan. Best practice, as outlined in the Pennsylvania Dependency Benchbook, encourages the discussion of and planning for parent/child visitation at the onset of judicial proceedings (Shelter Hearing – Chapter 5).

The Benchbook also stresses the court’s role in the establishment of specific visitation plans that provide frequent, quality and age-appropriate visitation (Visitation – Chapter 7). But how frequent is “frequent”, what creates “quality”, and what is the best schedule and setting for “age-appropriate” visitation? Should visits be supervised and if so, by whom? Who should be included in visits? Where should visits occur?

This section contains information to assist judges in answering these and other important questions regarding visitation. Section articles stress the importance of establishing case specific visitation plans that meet the individual needs of children as well as the importance of ongoing judicial oversight. Specific information regarding the importance of visitation on a child’s emotional and developmental needs is provided.

Finally, the section provides suggested visitation guidelines based on the child’s developmental needs, provides a sample visitation questionnaire, and discusses the “attachment” that can be promoted through meaningful visitation.

