

# Pennsylvania Parent Visitation Guide



VISITATION

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## **Why is Child Welfare involved with my family?**

The job of the child welfare agency is: to protect children from abuse and neglect, to keep families together whenever possible and to make sure that every child under our care and supervision has a safe, permanent home.



## **Why are you giving me this booklet?**

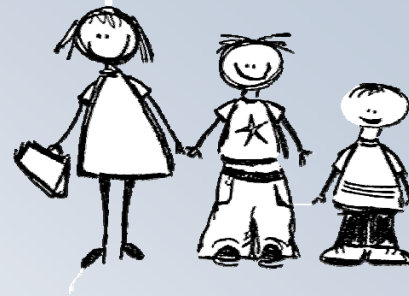
This booklet is for parents who are involved with the child welfare agency and who have their children living outside of their home. The child welfare agency can go by different names in different counties but the names you will hear most of the time are Children and Youth Services (CYS) or Children, Youth and Families (CYF). Whatever the name may be, the job of the agency is the same in all counties. The agency's job is to make sure that children are safe, have a permanent home and are having their basic needs met by their families. Basic needs include food, safe housing, supervision, clothing, education, medical care, etc.

The agency investigates reports of child abuse, neglect and teen issues to determine if they are true. If the reports are true and there are safety issues identified, the agency must decide if the child will be safe if they stay in their parent's home. Most of the time children can stay in their home with their parents and the family will receive services to address the safety issues.



Other times the safety issues cannot be addressed while the child remains in the home and the child enters placement. Children may be placed with a relative, in a foster home, or in

a group home facility. When a child is placed, visitation must be arranged for the child and the parent to keep their relationship strong.



If you have a safe family member who is able to care for your child, while you take care of the things the agency has asked of you, please talk to your caseworker and/or your attorney. Living temporarily, with caregivers your child already knows, can help reduce trauma. Visitation is a very big part of your child returning to your home. Both the agency and the court look very carefully at the interaction between parents and children during visits.

This is especially important if your child has been out of your home for 15 out of the past 22 months, when both the agency and the court have legal requirements to make decisions about where your child will permanently live.

This booklet contains information that will help you know what to expect with regard to visiting your child. Information is provided on how often you may visit face-to-face, other types of contact you may have with your child, your responsibilities for the visits, the agency's responsibilities, developing a visitation plan, what to do if there are problems, and other information. In the back of this booklet are the names and phone numbers of your caseworker and their supervisor as well as the contact information for your attorney, your child's attorney and the CASA worker, if one is involved.



## What are the values and purpose of visitation?

In Pennsylvania visitation is a right, not a privilege, and should never be used as a punishment .

Children enter placement because of concerns with their family, serious enough, that the child's safety cannot be maintained while the child stays in their own home. Out-of-home placement is a devastating event for the child and the entire family. The trauma of separation can affect a child's learning, emotional, and behavioral well-being for a long time. Placement is also traumatic for parents and can affect their ability to function normally. So, it is critical that children be returned to their family as soon as safely possible.

The purpose of visitation between parents and their children is as follows:

- ◇ To preserve or develop the parent/child bond
- ◇ To provide an opportunity to improve a healthy parent/child relationship
- ◇ To help the child deal with the trauma of being apart from their family
- ◇ To give the agency an opportunity to further evaluate family strengths and identify ways to help reduce concerns within the family
- ◇ To provide the parent an opportunity to learn, improve, develop, and practice parenting skills



Quality visitation that happens often and is meaningful, is important to maintaining the parent-child bond and getting a child home quickly.

Frequent, meaningful, and quality visitation is an important predictor of reunification.

## **What is the visitation planning process?**

You have a right to visit with your child while they are in placement. This right can only be taken away by a judge. The agency will try to arrange the first visit within 3 days of your child entering placement. Some agencies arrange visitation themselves, others have a social service provider that handles visitation arrangements. If your caseworker does not explain how visitation is handled in your county, you need to ask them or your attorney. No matter who handles the details of the visitation, a visitation plan must be created.

The plan will be developed between you, the child welfare agency, the provider (if there is one involved), your child's caregiver, and your child depending upon their age. The plan that is developed will consider your schedule and availability, not simply what is convenient for the agency. The plan will also consider your child's medical needs or extracurricular activities as well as the schedule of your child's caregiver.



The following things will go into your visitation plan:

- ◇ How often you can see your child face-to-face and what other types of contact are allowed i.e., phone calls, computer contacts, medical/dental appointments, and extracurricular activities
- ◇ How to confirm visits ahead of time. Who to contact and what procedure to use
- ◇ Whether your visits will be supervised, who will supervise and what will happen during the supervised periods
- ◇ The location for your visits. The location could include your home, a relative's home, a visitation center, somewhere in the community, or an agency's office
- ◇ Who will be coming to your visits and what their role is

Making your visitation plan is very important so please attend the meeting where it is developed and make your feelings and needs known. If you think you were not listened to during the development of the plan and your needs were not addressed, please speak to your caseworker or their supervisor. If the situation is not fixed, please talk with your attorney. It is important to note that although your schedule is really important, the schedule also has to cover the needs of the other people involved and they may be different than yours. Compromise may be necessary. If you would like to have your family included in the decision making for your visitation plan, please ask your caseworker about Family Group Decision Making.



Family Group Decision Making will allow your family and friends to help develop a visitation plan, privately, that best meets the needs of your family and the requirements of the agency. Family Group Decision Making is a conference where you invite everyone you love



and care about and who loves and cares about your child, to help develop the best possible visitation plan. While professionals may be present at your conference, your family and friends will develop the visitation plan privately, without those professionals present. Please talk to your caseworker or attorney if you are interested in hearing more about having a Family Group Decision Making conference.

The law in Pennsylvania requires that visitation occur at least once every two weeks. Most Agencies are trying to provide visitation more frequently so that the minimum is once a week. Depending upon the age of your child, visitation could be up to three times a week or more.



### **What are the guidelines for visitation?**

As you and your caseworker work together to develop your visitation plan, there are many things that must be decided. The following questions will help you come up with a plan that works for you, your child, the agency and your child's temporary caregiver.

#### **General Questions**

- ◇ **What happens if I am late for the visit?** If you are going to be late for a visit, it is important to let someone at the agency know right away. You will want to ask your caseworker about the process to use if arriving late and/or you have to reschedule visits.



- ◇ **Who can I talk to before, during or after my visit to help me prepare and understand reactions that my child or I may have?** If you do not have a service provider helping you prepare before, during or after a visit, you can talk to your caseworker or another agency professional about both you and your child's reactions, including planning activities that can help you work through these reactions.

Communication between you and the person taking care of your child is important when understanding the emotions your child may be having. You can also ask for a Family Group Decision Making Conference to ask your family and friends to support you and your child.

- ◇ **What happens if I miss a visit?** If you are unable to attend your visit, please let your caseworker or their supervisor know prior to your visit so the agency can let your child know that you are unable to come. Your child will be looking forward to seeing you and may be very disappointed if they arrive at the visit and you are not there. You will want to talk to your caseworker and attorney about missed visits during your visitation planning and whether you are able to make up a missed visit.

### Housekeeping Questions

- ◇ **What is the policy with regard to food?** Depending upon where your visit is held, this can vary greatly. It is important to learn if there are foods your child cannot have due to a medical concern and if the facility allows food to be brought in. This can come up if you want to celebrate your child's birthday by bringing in a cake so it is better to know the guidelines ahead of time to avoid any conflict or disappointment.
- ◇ **What is the policy on smoking?** Normally smoking is not allowed in any office or facility. If the visits are in your home, this is something you can discuss with your caseworker. It may be that your child has a condition such as asthma, in which case smoking should be avoided.

- ◇ **What is the policy on giving your child a gift?** Generally parents can give their children gifts. You want to make sure however, that you are consistent with your child's caregiver on what your child is allowed to have. For example, your child may have asked for a video game but is on restriction because they skipped school and is not allowed to have it. This may require you delay giving the gift to your child.
- ◇ **What is the expectation for clean-up of the visitation area?** Ask the caseworker if you should be picking up the toys you use or clean the area in which you visit. Often cleaning the visitation area is a good activity to do with your child.



### **Safety of Your Child**

- ◇ **Can I use physical discipline?** Physical discipline is something that should not be used during visitation. If you have questions about how to manage your child's behavior, discuss this with your caseworker. Your caseworker is there to help you.
- ◇ **Can I tell my child what I hope will happen?** You absolutely can share your hopes, but please do not promise your child things you cannot do, such as a date when they will be home, if you really do not know. Your child is already sad and scared being separated from you and when you make promises like this it adds to their emotional upset. Be as honest as you can with your child about what is going on with you but always consider their age and what they are able to understand.

- ◇ **Can I hold my child and whisper to them?** Under normal circumstances it is fine to hold your child. Hugging, sitting on your lap, etc. are normal physical expressions that show your love for your child. While whispering to your child could also be seen as a very appropriate expression of love, there may be times when whispering is not okay. Your caseworker will let you know if this applies to your family.

There are also situations where physical contact and whispering are not allowed, such as situations when sexual abuse is being investigated or has been determined to have happened. If there is an open allegation of possible sexual abuse that the agency is still investigating, you will not be allowed to have unsupervised physical contact with your child. If this is your situation, you need to speak to your caseworker ahead of time to clarify the expectations in this area.

### ***What are Normal Expectations, Emotions and Feelings during visits?***

It is completely normal to be anxious about seeing your child for the first time since their placement. They are going through the same emotions as you. You may or may not know the people who are temporarily caring for your child so you may have a lot of questions about the people and your child's well-being. These are all questions to ask your caseworker before or after your visits but during the actual visit your attention needs to be completely on your child. Just as you have been worrying about your child, they have been worrying about you while trying to adjust to a completely new environment.

Your child may have a lot of questions for you about what happened to cause their placement, when they can come home, how all of their family members are doing, how the pets are, etc. Answer their questions as honestly as possible without promising things you cannot deliver.

It's helpful to have an activity planned so the focus is on doing something together to maintain your relationship. If you need some help with an activity idea for your visit, just ask. The agency can help with some ideas and/or supplies.

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Your child may be angry at you for the situation that has occurred or think it is their fault. If this is the case you will need to tell them that nothing was their fault and that you are taking full responsibility. Many counties have visitation programs that will help you anticipate what will happen during the visit and what you can do to address your child's concerns.

Your caseworker really wants to help make your visits a good experience for you and your child. Visits that are positive for both of you go a long way to helping you get your child safely returned to your care quickly, something important to all of us.

Your child may have medical needs that you are not familiar with or emotional concerns for which they are being treated. Asking your child's caregivers about these concerns can help you be consistent with your child's care and learn about any new care that is necessary.

Children generally experience less stress and trauma when their parent and their temporary caregiver get along. Please do your best to get along with your child's caregiver. They are not trying to be your child's parent, just a temporary substitute until you are able to take your child home.

If you are concerned about your child and the care they are receiving, talk to your caseworker about your concerns. It is also a good idea to discuss your concerns with your attorney. Do not verbally attack the caregiver, especially in front of your child. This will not eliminate your concerns and will frighten your child.



## **How will my child's other parent and their family be involved in visits?**



The agency will be making serious attempts to involve your child's other parent and their family in visitation. Children have the right to visit with both of their parents. If a parent is not currently involved, the agency will try to offer the parent services and visitation to begin to form a relationship between them and the child. The exception to these efforts would be if there was a documented account of the parent hurting the child or other children. In a case like that, the agency would investigate what happened and see if it is reasonable to provide services while still assuring your child's safety. Parents must be provided visits unless a court order stops visits.

The agency will also try to involve your child's father's or mother's family in services and visitation. Although the goal for your child is to safely return home with you, the agency must also look into all other possibilities for a permanent home and the other parent's family could provide that home. Additionally, years of research tells us that children who know both of their biological parents to some extent have the best outcomes.

## **What are the Rights and Responsibilities of Parent, Caregiver and Caseworker?**

**As the parent of a child in placement,** it is your responsibility to work hard to complete the services that will take away the safety issues that led to your child being removed from your care. Once the safety issues are no longer in existence and your ability to care for your child is increased, it is likely that you will be reunited with your child. The decision as to whether and when you will reunite with your child is made by a judge.



In making that decision, judges often take into consideration visitation along with other items contained in your Family Service Plan. Visitation is a very important part of your Family Service Plan. Research shows that parents who visit frequently with their children in a meaningful way have the best rates of their children returning to them forever.

The agency, or provider, will be making the Court aware of how your visitation has been going. If you attend all visits, interact positively with your child, support and care for your child during visits it will be presented in court. If you miss a lot of visits, leave early, come late and have little to no interaction with your child it will be presented in court. Therefore, if your life changes after the visitation plan is developed in a way that prevents you from visiting according to the plan, let your caseworker and attorney know immediately. If the agency and Court know there are changes in your life, the visitation plan can be revised. If they do not know what has changed in your life and you continue to miss visits, it may look like you are not interested in visiting your child.

If there are concerns with your visits, let someone know what is going on. For example, you may be visiting at a relative's home where no agency person is involved and the relative is not following through with their commitment to supervise your visits or is denying you access to your child. If you do not tell the agency or your attorney about these situations, no one knows they exist and they cannot be addressed. Try not to have open conflict with the caregiver for your child. **If you have issues that need to be addressed, bring them to the attention of your caseworker and/or attorney.**



**It is the responsibility of your child's caregiver** to help your child safely return to your care. They will be discussing your child's reaction to visits with the caseworker and child's attorney and will be reporting on your interaction with your child if the visits are held in their home. Please try to remember that they are not trying to be your child's parent but are fulfilling that role on a temporary basis. Your child depends on the caregiver just as they would depend on you. If you can develop a positive relationship with the caregiver it will benefit your child during their placement. If you think the caregiver is working against your efforts to have your child come home, including visitation, you need to contact your caseworker and/or attorney and discuss the situation with them so it may be addressed by the agency and possibly the Court.



**It is your agency caseworker's responsibility** to assure the safety of your child. It is also their responsibility to assure that visitation services are being provided the way they are stated in your visitation plan. If changes need to be made to the plan, your caseworker will assure that those changes are made. Please have on-going communication with your caseworker because that is how both of you will be up-to-date with information. Please remember that your caseworker may be delayed in getting back to your call due to a variety of reasons, including being out of the office. In the event that you need immediate help, you may ask for assistance from your caseworker's supervisor. The supervisor can help you in the caseworker's absence. You also may want to share any concerns with your attorney.





## ***Do I have an Appeal Process?***

If you do not agree with the visitation plan, you can discuss your concerns with your caseworker and their supervisor. In addition to expressing your concerns verbally, you may appeal in writing to the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children, Youth and Families regional office.

If your visits are court ordered, you can also discuss any concerns you may have with your attorney. It may be necessary for your attorney to present a request to the court for changes to be made with your court ordered visits.

Please remember that a new or follow up Family Group Decision Making Conference can also be held to allow you and your family to develop or revise a visitation plan that meets your needs and the requests of the agency.



## ***What happens if I do not follow the Visitation Plan?***

If the visitation plan is not being followed, the agency will first explore the need for changes to the plan that better meet you and your family's needs. The agency will talk to you to find out why you are not following the visitation plan. The agency is aware of how difficult visitation can be for both parents and children and wants to help make the process less difficult.

In some circumstances where continued missed visitation are affecting your child emotionally, there are continued disturbances during your visit, or your child is placed in an unsafe visitation situation, the agency may request that the Court reduce the amount of visitation you are receiving until changes can be made to your visitation plan.

On the other hand, visitation may be increased if you are making progress with services designed to address safety issues existing in your home, have attended your visitation regularly, and have positive interactions with your child. Increasing visitation is very important.

We cannot emphasize enough that **timeliness matters when your child is in placement**. It is important that you are present for all of your scheduled visits. By maintaining a relationship with your child you increase the chances that your child will return to your care. You also show that you are committed to fixing the safety issues that led to the placement of your child.

Out-of-home placement is very difficult for your child and seeing you on a regular basis helps to reduce their worry and anxiety. As stated many times in this guide, if there are changes in your life that impact your ability to follow the visitation plan, let your caseworker and attorney know. If no one knows of the new challenges you are facing, no one can help you.

Your caseworker wants to be your partner in successfully completing your Family Service Plan, which includes visitation. Your caseworker wants to help you. Your attorney also wants to help you. We encourage you to resolve the safety issues that brought your child into foster care. At the same time we want you to attend visitation regularly. Your child is really counting on you.





Important Phone Numbers:

Agency Caseworker: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_

Caseworker Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_

Your Attorney's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_

Visitation Provider: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_

CASA Worker (if assigned): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_

Your Child's Attorney (Guardian ad Litem): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_



**For additional copies of this Parent Handbook please contact:**

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