



Family Time/ Visit Coaching: A Key to Permanency

In the field of child welfare, we have typically used the term “visitation” to refer to time between children or youth placed in foster care and their parent or other caregiver from whom they were removed. While the goal of time between the child and parent is multifaceted, the primary goal is to support the child’s needs and promote a healthy, age-appropriate relationship between parent and child with support from a parent coach. To better reflect this important goal, we propose that child welfare professionals begin to think and speak about this time as “family time” as opposed to “visitation.”

While it is widely accepted that parent-child relationships are an important component within supervised visitation services, child welfare professionals are not typically trained to help parents build on their own strengths or to guide parents in responding to their children’s reactions to separation. Resultantly, throughout the time the case is open, parents’ concepts of their children’s needs may remain different from the developmental and safety needs of concern to the social worker, foster parent, parenting teacher, or therapist. In addition, the parent’s preoccupation with complying with court-ordered treatment, visitation, and/or other case mandates may further obscure their focus on their child’s needs even (and perhaps especially) during the visit itself. Moreover, parent behaviors such as missing or being late for visits are often viewed as the parent being unreliable, incapable, or not caring about their child, rather than through a trauma informed lens as an indicator of the need for further skillful engagement by the agency. The resulting contextual chasm between the parent and the child welfare professional, as well as the parent and their child, often serves to negate the positive impact that visitation seeks to produce.

[Loar \(1998\)](#) finds that in order to achieve reunification without recidivism, supervised visitation needs to be more than a court compliance exercise or an opportunity to document parent and child interactions to inform reunification decisions. Indeed, if parents understand that the actual purpose of visitation is to make their children happy and to demonstrate that they can meet their children’s safety, emotional and developmental needs, they will be much better positioned to approach visitation as an opportunity for successful family time, which even on a purely linguistic level evokes a substantially more positive image and outlook. When such family time is supported by a child welfare professional equipped with tools to

help coach parents to better meet their children's needs when necessary, the true spirit of visitation services is realized to the benefit of the parents and their children.

Research findings agree that supervised visitation services that build strong alliances with families, provide skills training, and assist family members with concrete needs, resulted in sustained reunification more often than comparison services ([Fraser, Walton, Lewis, Pecora, & Walton, 1996](#)). Dr. Marty Beyer put a name to this strength-based and collaborative approach to visitation services in the development of visit coaching.

What is Family Time/Visit Coaching?

While family time coaching or visit coaching can be considered an alternative approach to supervised visits, it is important to note that it is also fundamentally different from visits because of the focus on the strengths of the parent and the specific needs of the children before, during and after family time.

Family time/visit coaching views positive experiences with a parent as a fundamental emotional and developmental need of all children, and thus supports families to make each visit fun for their children and to meet the unique needs of each child. The coach works with the parent to identify each child's specific emotional, developmental and safety needs that must be met during family time. For example, this may include needs such as "to use more words" and "to lead in play" for a 3-year-old, or "to be responded to with eye contact, talking and singing" for an infant.

Family time coaching involves a meeting between the coach and parent to plan the first visit the parent will have with his or her child(ren), as well as pre- and post-visit meetings (of about 10-15 minutes) between the coach and parent to plan for and debrief each visit.

Specifically, visit coaching includes:

- Helping parents articulate their children's needs to be met during family time
- Preparing parents for their children's reactions
- Helping parents plan to give their children their full attention at each visit
- Appreciating the parent's strengths in meeting each child's needs

Visitation

1. an instance of visiting: such: an official visit (as for inspection)
2. temporary custody of a child granted to a noncustodial parent , i.e., visitation rights
3. special dispensation of divine favor

Family

1. a basic social unit consisting of parents and their children, considered as a group, whether dwelling together or not: the traditional family
2. a social unit consisting of one or more adults together with the children they care for

Visit Coaching

1. Visit coaching is fundamentally different from supervised visits because of the focus on the strengths of the family and the needs of the children. Visit coaching supports families to make each visit fun for their children and to meet the unique needs of each child.

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- Giving direct feedback when a parent does not adequately meet the child's needs and planning for how they can better meet these needs next time
- Helping parents cope with their feelings so that they can visit consistently and keep their anger and sadness out of family time

Implementing Family Time/Visit Coaching

While some agencies may initially assume that visit coaching training is unnecessary or even already in place organically because their caseworkers already give parents pointers while supervising visits, it is important to note the distinction between supervising visits, or even providing parenting education during visits, and coaching parents to meet their children's needs. Given the challenges parents face in visiting their children, they require more support than someone in the visit supervision role can provide. For the parent who has been removed from the parenting role and feels guilt and anger about what has happened to their child, it is unlikely that direction to interact with their child or discipline in a certain way, for example, will make family time productive (despite the good intentions of the worker or parenting teacher). Visit coaching, on the other hand, allows the coach to work with the parent where they are at and to engage with them on a more strengths-based, collaborative level to help them grow as parents.

Congruent with the common initial reaction to skills-based coaching between supervisors and social workers, the initial reaction to the concept of visit coaching may be that it is certainly ideal, but nevertheless impossible to implement because of the time commitment involved and the competing demand of caseload size. However, even though coaching makes visits somewhat more time-consuming, specifically with the addition of pre- and post-visit coaching, when staff are trained to coach visits, cases close more quickly in either direction: parents who are capable and willing to make changes to ensure the safety and well-being of their children will find a skilled and collaborative coach who can guide them toward acquiring the skills necessary to be reunited with their children; while parents who are not capable or willing to make the necessary changes often come to the realization on their own (through the inherent self-reflective process that a skilled coach will facilitate) that a different placement might be best for everyone involved. In either case, the safety and well-being of the children is supported and permanency very likely expedited.

By slowing down now to go faster later with coaching, "visitation" becomes family time, and the parents will be empowered and engaged to make decisions that will ensure safety, stability and permanency for their children.

Watch visit coaching developer Marty Beyer's comprehensive overview of visit coaching at the Northern California Training Academy's YouTube page:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ii2r1sWSWfo>



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