



CRB Statewide Assessment of Visitation

Background

For children in foster care, visits with parents, siblings and other family members preserve attachments and reduce anxiety about the foster placement. Frequent and quality visits between children and parents are also one of the best predictors of successful and lasting reunification.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) policies require preparation of a Temporary Visit and Contact Plan when a child first enters care and development of an Ongoing Visit and Contact Plan within 30 days. The child, parent or guardian, and each sibling have a right to visit as often as reasonably necessary to develop and enhance their attachment.

In the 2013-2014 fiscal year, the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) in Lane County conducted a comprehensive policy review and a survey of over 200 cases. The panel found that DHS visitation policy was sound yet its implementation was uneven. The panel requested that the CRB explore the effectiveness of visitation policy implementation statewide. The CRB presented the idea to Lois Day, Director of Child Welfare, who agreed that the data would assist in informing the field about current practices.

Assessment Design

This statewide visitation assessment was designed based on the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). Specifically, the Permanency Outcome 2 questions from the upcoming Round 3: Preserving the continuity of family relationships and connections for children. Specific questions addressed:

1. Usual frequency of visitation (mother/father/siblings) in the past six months
2. Whether concerted efforts were made to ensure that visitation was of sufficient **frequency** to maintain or promote the continuity of the relationship
3. Whether concerted efforts were made to ensure that visitation was of sufficient **quality** to maintain or promote the continuity of the relationship

From November 1, 2014 through April 30, 2015 citizen review boards (CRB) across the state used the visitation survey for each review in which the goal was return to parent.

Data was collected from 33 counties in Oregon on 1,316 children. This data, combined with the data that the CRB collects on every child reviewed, provides an in-depth picture of current visitation practices for children who have a permanency plan of reunification. Cases where a parent was unknown, deceased, whereabouts unknown, or had their rights terminated were excluded from the analysis.

Results

Usual Frequency of Visitation

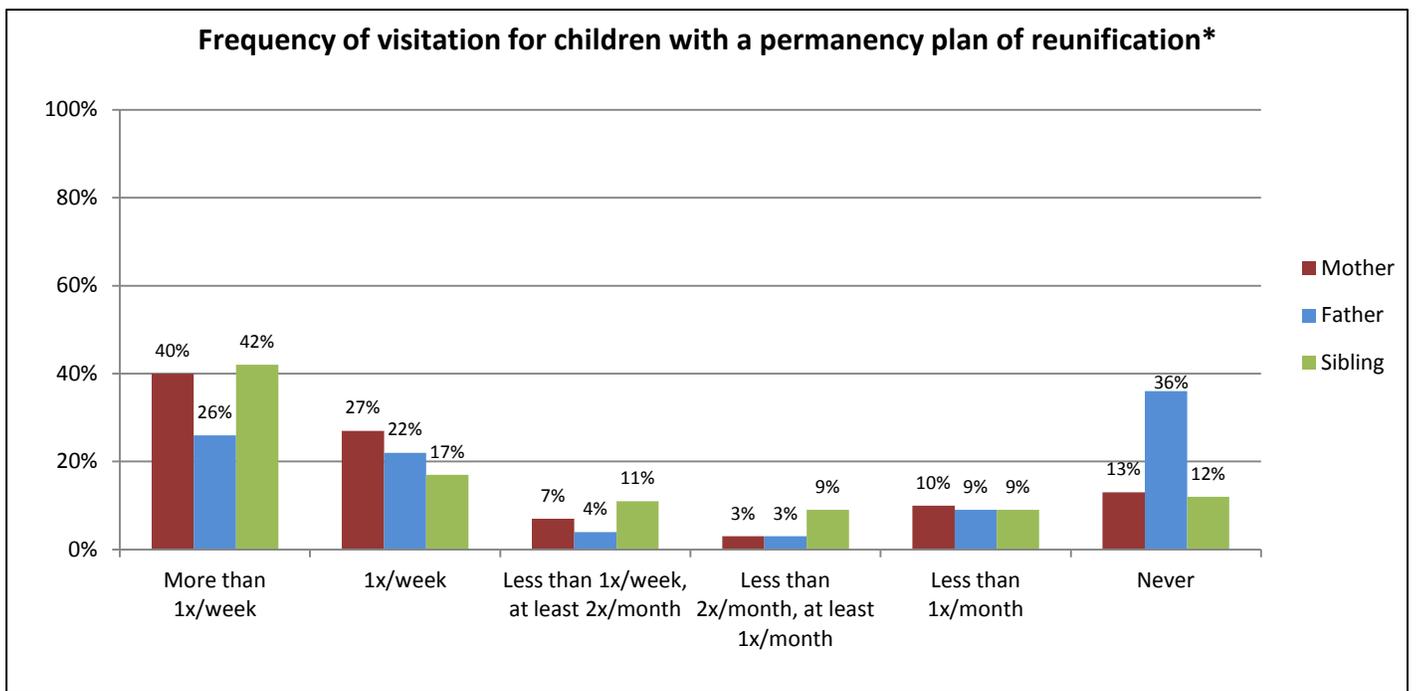
The visitation survey asked citizen review boards to determine the usual frequency of visits between the child and the parents and siblings during the period under review (the six months preceding the review date.)

Visitation Survey: Frequency of Visits
More than once a week
Once a week
Less than once a week, but at least twice a month
Less than twice a month, but at least once a month
Less than once a month
Never
Not applicable <small>(person does not exist, is unknown, deceased, whereabouts unknown, rights terminated, or contact is not in child's best interest)</small>

Three trends from this data stood out and will be explored further in this report. The first is that less than half of children under the age of five, when attachment is most crucial and frequent visitation most needed, are visiting their mother more than once per week. Only about a third are visiting their father more than once per week.

The second trend is the disparity between children's visits with mothers and their visits with fathers. 36% of the children included in the data have never visited with their father despite the father's whereabouts being known and there being no determination that contact is not in the child's best interest, compared to only 13% who have never visited with their mother.

The third trend is a lack of sibling visits. 30% of children included in the survey data are visiting with siblings only once per month or less.



*Cases where a person does not exist or is unknown, deceased, whereabouts unknown, rights terminated, or contact is not in the child's best interest are excluded from the data

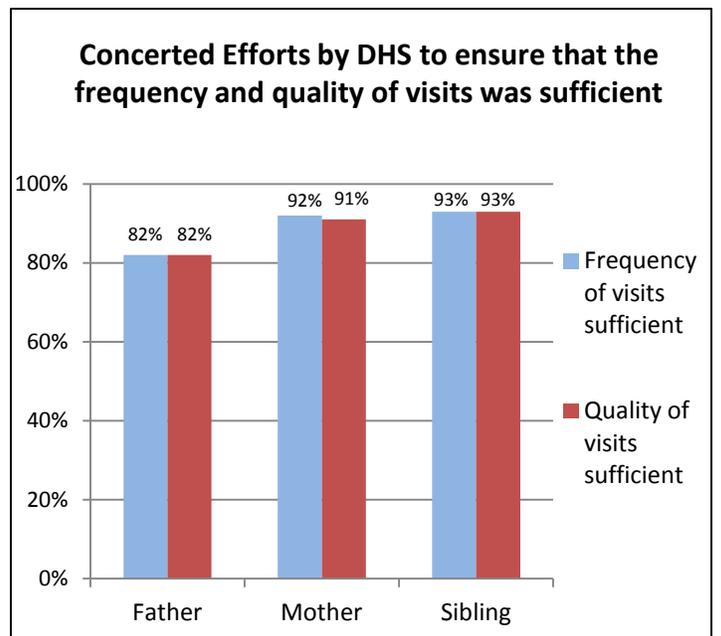
Concerted Efforts to Ensure that Visitation was of Sufficient Frequency and Quality to Maintain or Promote the Continuity of the Relationship

The CFRS states that appropriate frequency depends on the circumstances of the case. For example, frequency may need to be greater for infants and young children who are still forming attachments or for any child when reunification is imminent. Visitation should be as frequent as possible unless safety concerns cannot be adequately managed with supervision. If frequent visitation is not possible, DHS should make concerted efforts to promote other forms of contact between the child and the mother or father. In addition to frequency, the CFRS requires an evaluation of whether the quality of visitation maintains the continuity of the relationship. When evaluating concerted efforts towards the quality of visits, the CFRS advises consideration of the following:

Did the visits occur in a comfortable environment for an appropriate length? Did they allow for sufficient interaction between children and parents? If appropriate, were unsupervised visits in the parents' home in preparation for reunification permitted?

The visitation survey collected data on the concerted efforts made by DHS to ensure that the frequency and the quality of visitation maintained

the family relationship. The citizen review boards found that in 92% of the cases reviewed, DHS made concerted efforts to ensure that the frequency of visits for mothers was sufficient and in 91% of the cases, the quality of the maternal visits was sufficient. For fathers, the CRB boards found that concerted efforts towards frequency and towards quality were made in 82% of the cases. The CRB boards found that concerted efforts for sibling frequency and quality were made in 93% of the cases reviewed.



This data only includes those parents who are known to DHS.

Concerted Efforts in Action

When K., age 5, and C., age 7, were removed from their parents' care due to domestic violence, drug abuse, and mental health issues they were placed in non-relative foster care. The parents soon moved out of county in order to be closer to family support, which could have had a negative effect on visitation with their children. However, DHS adapted the visit schedule so that visits were scheduled on the days when parents came into town, and after assessing for safety increased the in-office visits to twice per week, then increased visits again to three unsupervised visits per week. The parents were able to Skype with the children on the days when they didn't have a visit, maintaining daily contact. At the time of the CRB review, DHS and the parents were developing the transition plan for the children to be returned home and reunified with their parents. While frequent, quality visitation was not the only reason that the children were able to return home after seven months in care, it was one of the factors that led to a successful reunification.

The frequency data by age shows that as children get older, visitation frequency declines. At CRB reviews, the most commonly given explanation for the decline in visits for school-aged children is the difficulty of scheduling visitation around school; because visitation is often offered during business hours, children may have to leave school in order to participate in a visit. For children under age 5, school isn't an impediment for frequent visitation to occur. However, the data is clear that many children under age 5 (possibly more than half) are not having more than one visit with a parent per week.

Frequency of visitation for children under age 5

	Mother	Father
More than 1x/week	46%	32%
1x/week	29%	27%
Less than 1x/week, at least 2x/month	3%	2%
Less than 2x/month, at least 1x/month	3%	3%
Less than 1x/month	8%	10%
Never	11%	26%

Frequent, meaningful visitation is important for all children regardless of their age, but vitally important for children under the age of 5. A child's experiences and relationships during the first few years of life are critical to their future social, emotional and cognitive development.¹ The effect of separation from parents on very young children disturbs attachment and may harm a young child. Research has shown that young children need visitation that is both frequent and for a duration that will enable them to maintain or form attachments.² Infants and toddlers benefit from daily visitation, or at the very least every two or three days.³

There are a multitude of reasons why visitation may not be occurring more frequently between young children and their parents. The visitation survey collected data on the reasons why visitation was not increased during the review period, and the most frequent reasons were due to the parents' circumstances: either their behavior at visits, the fact that they were incarcerated or in residential treatment, or the fact that the current visitation level was in the child's best interest. Certainly, the circumstances or behaviors of the parents can make frequent visits difficult or impossible, but it doesn't completely explain why very young children are not having more frequent visitation with parents.

In fact, the frequency of visits for parents who are making positive progress towards reunification is not substantially better; **in the cases of children under age 5 where the CRB made a positive finding for the parent's progress, only 67% of those children were visiting with their mother more often than once per week and only 60% were visiting with their father.** For those parents making positive progress towards reunification, more frequent visits should be part of their reunification plans.

Visitation more often than 1x/week by Age

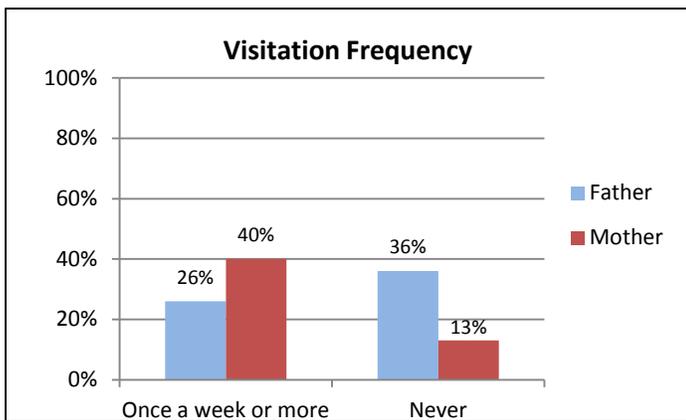
	Mother	Father
Under Age 5	46%	32%
Age 5-12	40%	28%
Age 13+	29%	11%

Visitation for Fathers

Fathers have a direct impact on the well-being of their children. A number of studies suggest that fathers who are involved, nurturing, and playful have children with better intellectual functioning, who experience more secure attachment, and are better able to handle stress and frustration.⁴ However, the data is clear that fathers are visiting their children far less frequently than mothers.

The reasons for this may be partly attributable to the fact that many children in foster care are removed from their mother’s care. In these cases, DHS has an immediate opportunity to engage with the mother, but may have to first identify and locate the father before visitation can begin. Efforts to engage non-custodial fathers (for example, sending letters) may not be effective.

Fathers may be incarcerated or live out-of-state, which makes visitation difficult, and since a return to these fathers is unlikely to occur, the focus shifts to the mother. While some of these reasons may be valid, the data is clear that effective engagement of fathers to promote visitation with their children is not as successful as it could be. The data shows that fathers are less likely to have frequent (more than once a week) visitation with their children and far more likely to have never visited with their child while in care.



Of the 1,316 children included in the visitation survey, 1,012 have an identified father. 364 (36%) of those fathers have never visited with their child while in foster care.

The visitation survey data does not provide a conclusive answer as to why all 364 of those fathers are not visiting, but it does provide some answers.

72 (20%) of those fathers were incarcerated during the review period. Visitation for incarcerated parents

can be extremely difficult as the Department of Corrections (DOC) determines visitation privileges for inmates. Additionally, visitation with incarcerated parents is sometimes not therapeutically recommended for children. Of those 72 incarcerated fathers, the Court or a trained therapist recommended limited or no contact for 31 (43%) of them.

For the remaining 292 (80%) non-incarcerated fathers who have never visited with their child, the reason why is not as clear. The role of fathers in the well-being of children is a relatively recent field of study- the first national meeting dedicated solely to issues concerning working with fathers in child welfare did not occur until 1994.⁵ Because mothers are so often the primary caregivers and the research on the important role that fathers can play is so new, DHS caseworkers may presume that visitation between the child and mother is a higher priority than establishing a relationship between the child and the father. Additionally, there may be valid safety concerns in allowing fathers to have contact with their child. Of the 292 non-incarcerated fathers who have never visited with their child, the Court or a trained therapist recommended limited or no contact for 59 (20%) of them.

Visitation with Siblings

Safety concerns, lack of parental engagement, and Court ordered or therapist recommended no contact can affect the frequency of visitation between children and their parents. However, these issues rarely limit visitation among siblings, as limited or no contact between siblings was recommended in just 8% of cases. In the remaining 92% of cases, visitation between siblings should be occurring. Maintaining sibling connections is important for all children, but especially vital for those children who do not have or do not want frequent visitation with parents. For these children, the sibling relationship may be the only family relationship they have.

Sibling Visitation for Siblings Not Placed Together	
More than 1x/week	42%
1x/week	17%
Less than 1x/week, at least 2x/month	11%
Less than 2x/month, at least 1x/month	9%
Less than 1x/month	9%
Never	12%

Among children who are not placed with siblings, 41% are visiting with their siblings less than once per week and 21% are visiting with siblings less than once per month.

During CRB reviews, some boards report that when they inquire about sibling visitation, they are told that it must be arranged between the foster families or that DHS rarely has the capacity to facilitate sibling visits outside of parental visits that siblings attend together. While visitation as a family is important, it is equally important that siblings have opportunities to visit with each other outside of the DHS visit rooms.

The Importance of Sibling Visitation

Sisters S., age 16, and R., age 14, have been in separate non-relative foster homes since 2011. Their younger half-brothers, I., age 12, and N., age 11, are placed together in relative foster care out of county. At a CRB review, S. and R. reported that they really wanted to have phone calls and visits with their younger brothers. Because the children lived in three different foster homes in two different counties and didn't have visitation with their parents, the siblings would go months without any contact. DHS had arranged a phone call for the children on Christmas Eve, but R. was the only one to call in.

The CRB board made recommendations that DHS facilitate in-person visits and regular, scheduled phone calls for all four children. At the next CRB review, the children reported that they now had regular bi-monthly visits together and almost daily phone contact. Their CASA shared some photos from their visits and it was clear that all four of the children were benefitting from the renewed contact.

Conclusion

Visitation has often been called “the heart of reunification.” Frequent, quality visitation is essential for a child’s well-being. Based on the specific circumstances of each case, board members felt that in 9 out of 10 cases reviewed, DHS was making concerted efforts to ensure that the frequency and quality of visitation was sufficient to maintain and promote the continuity of the relationship between children and their families.

However, in approximately 1 in 4 cases, visitation plans were not reviewed with a parent within the past 90 days as required by DHS policy. Also in about 1 in 4 cases, board members believed the circumstances of the case supported revision of the current visit and contact plan.

Recommendations

1. DHS develop specific guidelines for creating and updating visit and contact plans for children under five. A minimum standard for frequency of visits unless an exception is granted could be helpful.
2. DHS expand ways they reach out to non-custodial fathers such as having a male parent mentor attempt to make initial contact with a father by phone.
3. DHS allocate resources specifically to support regular visits between siblings who live in separate foster homes.

Endnotes

¹*Child and Family Visitation: A Practical Guide to Support Lasting Reunification and Preserving Family Connections for Children in Foster Care.* (Minnesota Child Safety and Permanency Division)

²Smariga, M. (2007). *Visitation with infants and toddlers in foster care.* (Zero to Three Policy Center).

³*Child and Family Visitation*

⁴Rosenberg, J and Wilcox, W.B. *The importance of fathers in the healthy development of children.* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families)

⁵Rosenberg, J and Wilcox, W.B.

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Appendix I: CRB Visitation Survey

1A. Select the box next to the statement that best describes the usual frequency of visits between the person and the child during the period under review.

*If the child has multiple siblings and the frequency of visits with each of them is not the same, use the sibling the child visits most frequently to complete the table and answer question 1B.

	Mother	Father	Sibling*
More than once a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Once a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Less than once a week, but at least twice a month	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Less than twice a month, but at least once a month	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Less than once a month	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not applicable <i>(person does not exist, is unknown, deceased, whereabouts unknown, rights terminated, or contact is not in the child's best interest)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Skip question 1B if the child does not have multiple siblings

1B. Does the child visit each sibling at the same frequency? Yes No

2. Did the court order or a trained therapist recommend limited or no contact?

MOTHER	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
FATHER	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
SIBLINGS	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A

3. Were concerted efforts made to ensure the **FREQUENCY** of visits during the review period was sufficient to maintain or promote the continuity of the relationship?

MOTHER	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
FATHER	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
SIBLINGS	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A

4. Were concerted efforts made to ensure the **QUALITY** of visitation during the review period was sufficient to maintain or promote the continuity of the relationship?

MOTHER	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
FATHER	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A
SIBLINGS	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A

5. Was the Visit and Contact Plan reviewed with a parent within the last 90-days?

Yes No

6. Was the frequency of visits with a parent increased and/or level of supervision reduced in the review period?

Yes No

If not, why? _____

7. Does the board believe the circumstances of the case support revision of the current Visit and Contact Plan?

Yes No

If yes, what should change and why? _____

Appendix II: CRB Visitation Survey Instructions

1. Fill out one survey for each child reviewed with a plan of reunification.
2. Make sure that the survey is stapled to the yellow data sheet of the applicable child.

3. DEFINITIONS

Mother is defined as the female legal parent of the child.

Father is defined as the male legal parent of the child.

Parent is defined as the male or female legal parent of the child.

Sibling is defined as one of two or more individuals having one common parent.

4. There is no specific definition of concerted efforts to ensure the frequency of visits is sufficient to maintain or promote the continuity of the relationship, however, the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) provide some guidance in making the determination.

It states that the question of appropriate frequency depends on the circumstances of the case. For example, frequency may need to be greater for infants and young children who are still forming attachments. Frequency also may need to be greater if reunification is imminent. Visitation should be as frequent as possible, unless safety concerns cannot be appropriately managed with supervision. The opportunity for visitation should not be used as a consequence or reward for parents or for children.

If, during the review period, frequent visitation with the mother or father was not possible (for example, due to incarceration or the mother or father being in another state), determine whether there are documented concerted efforts to promote other forms of contact between the child and the mother or father, such as telephone calls or letters in addition to facilitating visits when possible and appropriate.

Appropriate frequency should be based on the circumstances of the child and family, rather than on state policy. To make a determination about concerted efforts, boards need to be asking review attendees questions about what efforts were made and what their opinion is about the frequency of visits in supporting attachment as review attendees will know much more about the circumstances of the child and family than board members.

5. There is no specific definition of concerted efforts to ensure the quality of visits during the review period was sufficient to maintain or promote the continuity of the relationship, but once again, CFSR does provide some guidance.

For visits with parents, the CFSR suggests considering things like: Did visits take place in a comfortable atmosphere and were they of an appropriate length? Did visitation allow for sufficient interaction between mother or father and child? If siblings were involved, did visits allow mother or father to interact with each child individually? If appropriate, were unsupervised visits and visits in the mother's or father's home in preparation for reunification allowed?

For visits with siblings, the CFSR suggests considering whether visits were long enough to permit quality interaction, whether sibling contacts only occurred in the context of parent visitations, and whether visits occurred in a comfortable atmosphere?