

The Importance of Parent-Child Visitation in Child Welfare Family Reunification: A Closer Look at the “Family Time” Program in Development in Napa County

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the greatest predictors of placement stability, successful family reunification, and in some cases, preventing re-entry into child welfare is ensuring the visits between parent and child/ren starts within three to five days of a child being placed in out-of-home care. Research finds that consistent weekly visits increase the likelihood of successful reunification, reduce the time in out-of-home care, and promote healthy, secure attachments. One important component of parent-child visits is that it gives the parent(s) opportunities to practice and enhance their parenting skills during that time.

Napa’s “Family Time” Program provides a meaningful parent-child visitation with a

concrete plan, including objectives and goals. During their time together, parents have opportunities to practice and enhance their parenting skills. At the same time, the objectives align with the parents’ overall goals of demonstrating safety and protective factors. The plan also involves progressive steps to assess the parent’s abilities to provide safety, thereby, addressing the reasons why the family came to the attention of the agency and ultimately addressing safety threats. The ongoing communication between the “Family Time” coaches and the assigned caseworker throughout the life of the family in the system is crucial so that families move to a less restrictive phase.

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Introduction

In 2020, Napa County Child Welfare Services began the work of expanding its Visitation Center program and practices to a “Family Time” Program with visitation coaches. Napa County Child Welfare Services implemented the Family Time Program to facilitate supervised and monitored contact between children/youth placed in out-of-home care and their parents, relatives, and siblings. The Division would like to continue with the enhancement of the Family Time Program by expanding the responsibilities of the Family Time coaches to provide more in-depth assessments of the quality of parent/child interactions. The purpose of the assessment would be to better inform planning toward progressive visitation and/or court recommendations to increase child and family well-being and increase the timeliness of permanency. The quantity of visitations is highly correlated with successful reunification.

Visitation is a critical service provided to those families whose children were removed due to confirmed abuse and/or neglect. The “Family Time” Visitation is required for children who have been detained/removed from the physical custody of their custodial parent(s)/legal guardian and occurs between the child and non-custodial parents, child and legal guardians, child and siblings, and child and parents. Visitation is an integral part of a case plan, and Family Time is considered essential for family reunification for children in out-of-home care. The Visitation Coaches play a critical role in ensuring that “Family Time” promotes the development of parenting skills, supports parental and child attachment, and ultimately facilitates healing supported by the skilled guidance of department visitation staff. Child Welfare Workers rely heavily on the Visitation staff to provide a detailed

account of parent-child interaction during visitation.

Project Rationale

Research on the correlation between parent/child visits and reunification in Child Welfare suggests that the regularity of visitation is directly related to children going home and safely staying home (Davis et al., 1996). The main reason for family contact is for children to build healthy and positive relationships with their families (Fein et al., 1990).

Recently, there’s a growing body of research that links meaningful family time for children in out-of-home care with many positive outcomes, including stronger parent engagement and a stronger likelihood that the child will return home and successfully stay home (USDHHS, 2020). Research also shows that during family time, a family should participate in activities at the child’s appropriate developmental level and parents should receive coaching to help grow knowledge and support the child’s needs (James Bell Associates, 2009). In addition, when consistent quality contact between the parent and child is paired with professional intervention, placement stability and the child’s overall well-being increase (Bullen et al. 2017).

Analysis

Creating specific goals and strategies as part of the Family Time/parent-child Visits while incorporating the “Phases of Progressive Visitation” will provide a structure for families during this very important time in their involvement with Child Welfare. Having specific activities that are related to the safety threat or reasons for which the family came to the attention of the agency is important so that families are aware of the agency’s expectations. Providing families a plan that includes expected behaviors that

support a family's progression to a less restrictive phase during their Family Time helps families have a clearer understanding of what is expected of them to achieve the overall goal of reunification. Current best practices in Child Welfare regarding involving families in the process of their own case plans point to behaviorally-based case plans. This is a practice that focuses on specific, concrete strategies and actions to change the parent's behavior effectively and permanently regarding its impact on the child rather than the completion of or compliance with services (Northern California Training Academy).

Visitation, or "Family Time," is one of the most important pieces of the case plan. Family Time should happen in the least restrictive way that is safely possible (Northern California Training Academy). In a Child and Family Team Meeting (a meeting style designed for collaborative conversations with families about different topics), multiple factors need to be addressed, including identifying what visitation could look like with the support of the network, identifying what activities the parent can do during Family Time to demonstrate behaviors that will help them meet the safety goal, and clarifying at what case decision points visitation may be reassessed or made less restrictive (Northern California Training Academy).

Rachel Varville, Social Services Supervisor, and Daphkar Lahens, Family Time Coordinator, share their program's current practices as well as their continued progress towards the development. Daphkar Lahens, the Family Time Coordinator, attends the first Collaborative Assessment Team (CAT). The CAT is a meeting the agency holds to share important information about the family, such as the reason for the current Child Welfare involvement, the identified safety threat, the harm and danger, how it

impacts the child, and safety goals. Present in the meeting is the Assistant Director, Emergency Supervisor, Emergency Response Worker, and the Dependency Investigations Worker. Once the Family Time Coordinator obtains information about the family, the Coordinator sets up the Family Time for that specific family as soon as possible. Currently, the Coordinator organizes everything about the visits, which includes the days of the week, frequency, times, transportation, and coach assignments. The Coordinator calls the parent as soon as possible (or as soon as she learns about the removal and the need for a visit) to make sure the parent stays engaged in the process and to avoid any lack of communication between the agency and the Family Time process. At the first visit, the assigned coach meets the family, goes over the visitation Family Time guidelines, and provides a tour of their location. Once the visit starts, the coach observes the visit and does not intervene in the interactions between the parent and child, unless there is a need. Currently, the information the coach has about the family is the reason for the Child Welfare intervention, harm statement, goal statement, and the family's preferred activities or suggested activities during the visit.

Napa's current plan is to continue to enhance its service delivery to include:

1. Peer coaching support for Family Time Coaches.
2. Expand to include a written analysis of a parent's progress in meeting their court-ordered visitation objectives concerning the following areas:
 - Assessing whether the parent/caregiver is consistently demonstrating acts of protection and supportive behaviors toward

the child that are consistent with the case plan objectives.

- Assessing whether the parent/caregiver reinforces appropriate roles and boundaries with the child(ren).
 - Assessing whether the parent/caregiver demonstrates an ability to recognize a child's behavioral and emotional cues.
 - Participating in agency case staffing to provide visitation findings and make recommendations for visitation levels (supervised, unsupervised, and monitored).
3. Development of a Family Time Program structure to include individualized plans for progressive visitation to be incorporated in the court-ordered case plan.
 4. Development of a Family Time Program assessment tool to provide a written summary of each visit beyond interactions and attendance to also include an analysis of the parenting skills demonstrated toward meeting case plan objectives and acts of protection.
 5. Development of a Family Time Program in which staff use principles of coaching for behavior change and improved parenting.

Currently, the following are the next steps identified by the program staff to continue with the Development of the program:

1. Finalize the policies and procedures regarding the documentation of the progressive visitation schedule based on court hearings, ask the units for feedback, and utilize their input to

create a timeline for progressive visitation.

2. Establish a process for the objectives and goals to be entered into the case plan under Visitation and for Family Time Coaches to be able to document the parent's progress.
3. Develop categories or language that will clarify what parents should be working towards during their time with their children.
4. Establish a channel of communication between the other units/caseworkers and Family Time so that Family Time can be seen as an integral part of the reunification process (this is already in progress).
5. Include Family Time at the initial and subsequent Child and Family Team Meetings.
6. Create a streamlined process for Caseworkers to provide information to the Family Time unit to be able to schedule same-day or next-day visits consistently after families have been separated.
7. Streamline a process for Caseworkers to submit referrals for Family Time requests for families.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that the staff impacted by the modification of already existing practices be involved in the enhancement of the "Family Time" Program.
2. It is recommended that each unit meets and discusses the Agency's goal/objectives regarding the development of the "Family Time" Program using the following three questions:
 - a. What is working well?
 - b. What are we worried about?
 - c. What needs to happen next?

3. It is also recommended that each unit creates a timeline with each function holding everyone accountable for the tasks created as next steps.
4. It is recommended that the Project Manager assigned to “Family Time” meet with the Assistant Directors and the supervisors to check on the status of the timeline and tasks assigned, identify any possible barriers for the next steps created by the different units, and prepare for each unit/function group meetings.
5. It is also recommended that policy and procedures work together with the different units to include staff input in the development of the desk guide.

Involving the different functions/units will give the agency information about the workforce strengths, different needs for training, and support needed to enhance the “Family Time” Program across the agency.

Recommendations for San Francisco

San Francisco Family and Services Children’s Division already has a comprehensive Family Visitation Program with many of the strategies, procedures, and components similar to the ones Napa County

Child Welfare Services is implementing in their Family Time Program. However, it is unknown how much of the resources and tools available to workers are currently being utilized to maximize this service for families in the reunification program. Therefore, at this time it is recommended that a survey is created to assess the current staff’s level of knowledge of the Family Visitation policy, guide, tools, resources, and expected practices, and create the next steps to address the results of the survey. It is also recommended that the management teams utilizing the visiting program get together, discuss practice expectations, and develop the next steps for addressing any current challenges.

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