A Bridge Back Home: Visit Hosts

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Background

Visiting is critical to children in foster care. Frequent and ongoing contact with family members reduces the trauma of removal for children, improves their adjustment to placement, and helps expedite permanency, regardless of whether the goal is reunification, adoption, independent living, or adult custodial care.

Visiting is also a critical element in the child welfare system’s response to the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). Passed by Congress in 1997, ASFA was designed to ensure that children in foster care are either reunited with their families or found other, permanent, stable homes in a timely manner. In order to meet ASFA’s time frames for permanency, it is critical that children maintain frequent contact with their families whenever it is safe for them to do so.

In August of 2006, Children’s Services re-issued the “ACS Best Practice Guidelines for Family Visiting Arrangements for Children in Foster Care.” The guidelines addressed the increasing recognition that improved family visiting reduces the confusion and anxiety of children in foster care; is a critical factor in the safe reunification of families; and supports the achievement of another permanency arrangement when reunification is not possible. The guidelines are intended to make visiting a fruitful, family-specific, child-focused opportunity to sustain and strengthen family relationships.

The visiting guidelines direct that, whenever possible and in the child’s best interest, agencies should:

- Offer weekly visits of at least two hours in duration;
- Arrange for visiting in a location outside the agency that is convenient for all parties;
- Provide the minimal level of supervision necessary to ensure the well-being of the child; and
- Increase the visit frequency and length in anticipation of reunification. Visits should evolve from weekly to more frequent visits of greater length, to overnight and weekend visits, leading to trial and then final discharge.

The guidelines introduce an intermediary category of supervision termed “monitored visiting,” designed to offer caseworkers more options and assist the progression from a

1See, “ACS Best Practice Guidelines for Family Visiting Arrangements for Children in Foster Care,” (“Guidelines”) December 2000, p.1 and see, cover memorandum from Commissioner Scoppetta to Foster Care Agency Executive Directors. The Guidelines are available at www.nyc.gov (type in either “ACS policies ASFA” or “ACS Best Practice Guidelines for Family Visiting” in the website search window and you will find a direct link to the guidelines.)

2The guidelines also seek to improve the quality and frequency of sibling visits.
higher to a lower level of supervision. The guidelines also clarify that (contrary to common practice) the presumption is that visits are unsupervised unless supervision is warranted. Supervision must be justified by a safety concern and/or need for assessment. Finally, the guidelines direct agency workers to identify “significant relatives (or others)” who “can and should be considered resources for the case planner...they can help...by hosting parent-child visits.”

As Children’s Services has worked with foster care agencies to improve visiting practices over the past six years the need for creative solutions has become clear. While many agencies have improved practices, too often visits still occur at the agency, supervised by the caseworker. Opportunities for parents to engage in more normal family activities with their children (medical appointments, recreation, etc.) are offered infrequently. Many agencies offer limited access to evening or weekend visits. Too often, visits conflict with other service requirements and responsibilities of the parent, as well as activities of older youth.

While understandable, such practices harm families. Research shows that visit arrangements significantly influence the quality of visits. One recent study suggested, for example, that agency visiting spaces may be the least reliable venue in which to make difficult and critical assessments about family attachment and a parent’s abilities to meet his/her child’s needs.

These guidelines cannot answer every question that may arise in working with individual families, as each situation is unique. However, these guidelines (and the practice tools in the appendices) are meant as a reference and tool for the exploration and implementation of this promising practice. For specific questions or assistance related to Visit Hosts or other areas of visiting, please contact the Children’s Services Office of Family Visiting at 212-487-8630.

**Introduction**

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3 Guidelines, pp. 3-4, 10-14.

4 Guidelines, p. 9.

Foster care agencies have cited insufficient resources and high caseloads as barriers to implementing frequent and quality visits. The practice of utilizing Visit Hosts offers a potential solution to these barriers on appropriate cases. These guidelines are intended to assist foster care agencies in recruiting and integrating Visit Hosts into routine family visiting practice for children in foster care. A Visit Host is someone identified by the family (parents, youth or relatives) or by the foster care agency who can monitor family visits for children and their parents or siblings in lieu of the agency worker. The use of Visit Hosts is a promising approach because:

- Frequent and high quality visiting between parents and children in appropriate cases is a vital predictor of safe reunification;
- Visits that are fun and permit a family to feel supported and engage in normal family activities support a child’s overall well-being and adjustment to foster care;
- Visits that are frequent and meaningful contribute to parents feeling empowered and motivated;
- Allows visits to be taken out of the agency earlier but still provides a level of supervision needed on the case.
- Agencies often need additional resources to consistently provide frequent and high quality visits, particularly visits that occur outside the agency or for extended time periods;
- Visit Hosts can be this additional resource on appropriate cases.

As the guidelines illustrate in greater detail, a Visit Host is someone who can assure the safety of the child(ren), is invested in the well being of the child(ren), and is supportive of the parent and the family’s attempts to reunify or maintain strong relationships. A Visit Host can accompany the family in settings that are more comfortable than the typical agency visiting room. She can bring participants together more frequently and for longer periods of time than an agency caseworker who has responsibility for multiple families. For example, Visit Hosts can hold regular family dinners, accompany the family to the library or zoo, or go with the parent to a child’s medical appointment.

Over the past several years, Visit Hosts have been used by New York City agencies sporadically but successfully (though they may not have been called “Visit Hosts”). Visit Hosts have been guidance counselors, pastors, trusted family friends or relatives, even, in one situation, the manager of a bowling alley. A Visit Host could also be a retired foster parent, an adoptive parent with whom the agency is familiar, or a parent advocate or other volunteer.

These guidelines should serve as a reference in recruiting, assessing and training Visit Hosts in order to provide more frequent, consistent and rewarding visits for children and their families.

### A. What Situations are Appropriate for Visit Hosts?
There are many situations in which Visit Hosts can enable families to spend more productive and meaningful time together. While the practice makes the most sense for those families with a goal of reunification, Visit Hosts may also be appropriate where reunification is not the goal but where there is a need to maintain a child’s connections to parents, siblings, extended family or others. Visit hosts can be integrated at any point during the life of a foster care case. Examples of family situations which may be ideal for consideration of a visit host include:

1. Large sibling groups where all the children do not reside together;
2. Older teens, regardless of the permanency goal, who wish to spend more time with each other, with parents, extended family, or other people identified by the teens themselves;
3. Families for whom the visiting plan should progress to more natural, less closely supervised visits, to support the transition to unsupervised visits;
4. Families who would benefit from a combination of unsupervised and supervised visits;
5. Families for whom more frequent visits outside the agency are appropriate but the agency lacks resources to facilitate such visits;
6. Families who can identify people with whom and/or places where they would like to spend time as a family outside the agency;
7. Families who can identify activities and events that they would like to participate in together or that the caseworker feels would be helpful for them to engage in together (i.e. parent attending early intervention appointments with a child or shopping for school clothes);
8. Families who are able to identify a person who could host visits;
9. Families in which a parent is isolated and a Visit Host could play an important role in building a support network for that parent;
10. Families who are homeless or otherwise lack appropriate housing or space in which to spend time together during the day or for overnight visits.

B. Identifying a Visit Host

In many cases, simply asking parents and youth about people who might be able to host visits will yield several options. A good starting point is to meet with the parent to gather psychosocial information and develop a genogram (i.e. resource map) including family members and other important people in his/her and the child’s life. Relatives who are

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6 Examples of situations where Visit Hosts may be important but where reunification is not the permanency goal include: teenagers who may not have a goal that includes returning to a parent but who should maintain connections with parents or other extended family, including teenage parents; Large sibling groups who may have distinct permanency goals, not all of which include reunification; cases where a parent suffers from a physical or psychiatric condition that makes it unlikely they will resume care of a child but where it is important for a child to have continued contact with the parent; situations where there is a need to strengthen and maintain a bond between an adoptive parent and the biological parent when the child would benefit from a model of “family” that does not discontinue contact with a biological parent.
identified but unable to be foster care resources are often good candidates. Places and activities that are important to the parent and family should also be explored. School age children may have been involved with coaches and guidance counselors; families may have been involved with churches, local community groups, or preventive agencies. These outside agencies often include people who not only know the family but who are also willing to help the family stay connected. Because these hosts would only be working with the particular family they know, they may be able to provide additional opportunities for visits, and have experience to draw from in supporting the family.

Visit hosts can also be identified by the agency, and can include existing staff or volunteers, parent advocates, prior adoptive parents, or others who may be willing or interested in hosting visits. Though not initially known to the family, these hosts can offer support and connections for families who may otherwise be isolated and in need of a greater support network. In other words, the benefits of exploring hosts even when families cannot identify one can be enormous.

Use of Visit Hosts can be explored at family team conferences, and at any casework meeting where service planning is discussed. Use of a Visit Host should be considered whenever the provider reviews the level or type of supervision that is necessary for a family. Certainly, a desire to have visits outside the agency or organized around more family-friendly activities should prompt a discussion of visit hosts.

Appendix C provides a complete list of questions to ask parents, and often youth as well, in the effort to identify potential visit hosts, but here are some that may be helpful:

1. Who are the people who are important to you and have been important and supportive to you and your family?
2. Does your child have a godparent or other adults he/she is close to? What other adults did your child spend time with prior to foster care?
3. How, and with whom, do you celebrate birthdays and holidays? What were fun activities that you did together prior to foster care? Who else participated in those activities? Are there school, church or recreational activities that are important to you or your children?
4. Are there people in your community who know your child, who you trust and feel are supportive and reliable?
5. (for a child/youth) Who else did you spend time with before you came into foster care? Would you feel safe if this person were at a visit with you and your parents? Who are other adults you like or respect?

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7 Current ACS Visiting guidelines direct that visiting plans should progress and/or be revisited at least every six months, so at a minimum, you should ask whether a visit host is appropriate in a particular case when visits have been supervised for six months and continue to go well.
C. Assessing Whether a Person is Appropriate to be a Host

A Visit Host’s primary responsibility at a visit is to ensure the safety and well-being of a child. Visit Hosts are not generally trained visit coaches or experts in child development. Nonetheless, in each case, you will have to determine if you feel this person is reliable and willing to work with the agency to support visiting, while at the same time attending to concerns about visits that you may have in a particular case. Some general criteria for potential Visit Hosts are outlined below to guide agency staff in making these assessments:

**General Criteria for Selecting a Visit Host**

An appropriate candidate to be a Visit Host is a responsible adult who:

1. Has a connection to the family OR is identified by an agency as someone who has demonstrated a commitment to supporting family reunification, mentoring, etc., such as a parent advocate or prior foster parent;

2. Is willing and able to host visits on an ongoing basis;

3. Is willing to maintain consistent contact with the foster care agency and respond to agency inquiries in a timely manner;

4. Will intervene appropriately if any problem occurs during a visit and is willing to report back to the agency;

5. Agrees to be honest and forthcoming about the quality and content of the visits;

6. Is knowledgeable about the original placement circumstances, ongoing family issues and current goals of the family;

7. Is invested in helping the family to have safe, productive, positive visits;

8. Is willing to participate in a home assessment (if relevant), interview, and background check for child abuse history;

9. Is willing to discuss any of his/her own relevant child protective services history with the agency;

10. Is willing to participate (if necessary) in training or orientation to learn more about the responsibilities of being a visit host or to learn how to meet the family’s needs during a visit;
11. Is willing to sign an agreement (if considered necessary) to the above expectations (a sample of such a written agreement is attached as Appendix E).

What to discuss with a Parent, a Child and the Host Candidate

Most of the time, when a parent proposes someone to host a visit, that person will be someone with enough history with the family that s/he will be aware of at least some of the circumstances that led to the child’s placement. Many relatives and community supports, for example, were close to the family prior to placement and it may be just this intimate relationship that makes them a good candidate in the first instance. However, this may not be the case, and parents should be asked about whether and how much the potential host knows about their child welfare case. Parents should always be given the option of sharing information with the Visit Host, and the case planner and the parent should come to agreement about how much information needs to be shared with the Host.

Prior to considering a visit host candidate (and certainly prior to meeting with a candidate), you should be sure to discuss with the parent that you will need to share with a Visit Host any information about the case that is pertinent to the child’s safety on a visit (which may include sharing the allegations that brought the child into foster care). For example, you may want to share with the host that the case involved substance abuse so that you can communicate to the host your expectation that the parent will be sober on a visit. You will need to obtain the parent’s explicit consent to release this information if the parent tells you that the Host is unaware of this history. You may have the parent sign a written consent form or forego a written consent and instead discuss this issue and then make a record of the discussion and the parent’s consent in your progress notes (copies of sample Consent forms are provided in Appendix D).  

Children, particularly older children, may also be able to propose a visit host, or at the very least tell you about other people with whom they spent time prior to care. Children are often able to tell you whether they feel safe with such a person and why. You should be sure to let a child know that s/he will have the opportunity to talk privately with the caseworker about how visits are going with the host once they begin.

How to decide whether someone is appropriate on any given case will vary with the circumstances. At a minimum, you should always have at least one meeting with the proposed Host individually and one meeting with the parent and the Host. More meetings may be necessary at first, including a meeting with the child/ren. Strengths-based information including progress and changes since the child’s entry into foster care

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8 If the visit host is someone who already works for or volunteers with the agency, such as a parent advocate, you should be sure to tell the Visit Host that the same expectations regarding confidentiality of families being served by the agency applies to the situation of hosting visits. In cases involving sharing substance abuse, HIV and/or mental health information, your agency may have particular protocol that you should follow to comply with federal law. If you have questions about how they relate to the practice of visit hosts, you should contact the Office of Family Visiting at 212-487-8630.
should be shared, as well as expectations and concerns. You may want to reference the
criteria above in structuring your discussion with a host candidate; for example, you will
need to tell them that you will be contacting the SCR to see if they have any history of
alleged child neglect.

As suggested, you should get a sense of how the person would handle particular
situations if child safety became a concern during a visit they were hosting; you should
also ask the person to describe his/her relationship with the child/ren or the parent to see
if it coincides with the description provided by the parent and/or child.

Possible Additional Activities to Include in the Assessment:

• ask the person to come to some of the visits currently being held at the agency so
  that you have a chance to see the person interact with the parent and child;

• ask the person for pertinent references;

• show the person redacted portions of any Visit Host agreements you have used on
  prior cases or would like to use on the identified case to see if it raises questions
  or concerns;

• if you have a Visit Host working on another case, ask the candidate to speak with
  that Host;

• contact Children’s Services Office of Family Visiting at 212-487-8630 if you
  have additional questions or need guidance about how to proceed.

D. Approving a Visit Host

Within your agency, you should have some discussion about whether you wish to
consider a Visit Host a “volunteer” in the same way that you do other people who assist
the agency without compensation, such as volunteers who help with transportation,
putting on parties or events, etc. Because most visit hosts will work with only one family
as opposed to being available to work with multiple families, they are not “volunteers” in
the typical sense. It is unclear whether, and to what extent, state regulations governing
agency volunteers would apply to every visit host situation, however, these
recommended steps for approving visit hosts are reflective of and based on those
regulations.9

9 Pertinent regulations governing agency volunteers are found at 18 NYCRR 442.18 et seq. Typical
liability coverage for foster care agencies covers volunteers in a variety of ways; if you have questions
about your agency’s liability coverage as it relates to visit hosts, you should contact the Office of Family
Visiting.
1. **Obtain an SCR clearance**: It is critical that you determine whether the Visit Host candidate has ever had allegations of abuse or neglect made against him or her. The mere existence of an SCR history should not automatically preclude the person from hosting visits; rather, as with potential foster parents, it should be one factor that the agency uses to determine if the Host is appropriate. In reviewing prior SCR history, agencies should consider how much time has passed since the report as well as the type and severity of the allegations.

   *In the situation of proposed Visit Hosts, Children’s Services will conduct an SCR clearance on the candidate in the same manner that expedited clearances are done for Child Protective Services, so that an agency need not wait for several weeks to gain this information. To request this, contact the Office of Family Visiting at 212-487-8630.*

2. **Address criminal background**: Criminal background checks are usually accomplished in one of two ways: either by fingerprinting or by asking a candidate to execute a sworn written statement attesting to any prior criminal record. **State regulations do not require fingerprinting for volunteers** and in addition, fingerprinting can be costly and time consuming. As is true of SCR clearances, the circumstances of any prior criminal record should be viewed with discretion as one factor, but not the only determinative one in approving a visit host (a sample of a sworn written statement is included as Appendix F).

3. **Provide for orientation, training and ongoing work with a Visit Host**: Orientation and training for a Visit Host can be informal, i.e., individual meetings you have with the host to discuss expectations. If you have identified several cases in which you would like to use Visit Hosts, you may ask all of the candidates to come in for a group training session. *In particular, a host needs to understand what s/he is expected to do if a child’s safety or well-being appears to be at risk at a visit.*

4. **Conduct a home assessment if the Host intends to monitor visits at his or her home**: Whenever the host will have the child and his/her family to the host’s home, you should conduct the same safety assessment you do when initially investigating the home of a potential resource. This is particularly important when someone is hosting extended or overnight visits.

   *In addition to these steps, programs may consider the following steps, depending on the circumstances of the case:*:

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10 You may wish to memorialize this expectation in writing, either in an agreement like the one in Appendix E or in a letter or “contract” that marks the beginning of the visit host’s role.

11 The additional suggestions outlined in 5-8 are not required by state regulation for volunteers, but they may, in a particular case, reflect prudent practice. One important consideration to keep in mind whenever you are approving a host is that the practice is designed to be as informal as possible in order to assure that
5. **Conduct an SCR clearance on any adult residing in the Host’s home:** If a child will be spending time at the host’s home or if other adults may accompany the host at visits, you should conduct an SCR clearance on those people. You should always be clear with the host that s/he is responsible for the visit and no other adult should be at the visit without the parent’s consent and the agency’s knowledge, or if prior agreements regarding the visit have precluded that person (i.e., someone who is considered a risk to the child or the parent). You should also talk with the child about additional adults who may participate.

6. **Ask the host and/or the parent to establish a written agreement about the visits:** Written agreements can function in the same way that other service “contracts” do in child welfare practice. While these agreements do not guarantee that a problem will never arise, they can help clarify the ground rules of the visit and provide guidance for both the host and the parents. “Contracts” can also help defend an agency’s decision to stop the Visit Host arrangement should that be deemed necessary. (A copy of a sample agreement is included as Appendix E)

7. **Have the Visit Host appear in court:** In those cases where the Court has made specific directions regarding visits in the past, you may wish to have the Visit Host appear with the worker in court to discuss with the attorneys on the case, as well as the judge, the plans and expectations for visits.

8. **Have the Visit Host meet other pertinent actors on the case:** The foster parent, other extended family and others may be able to help the Visit Host appreciate the importance of their role and can help parents appreciate that a Visit Host is an integral part of a service plan to help them reunify successfully with their child.

**E. Orientation, Training and Ongoing Work with the Visit Host**

Every case will be somewhat different in terms of the level of orientation or training a Host will need to begin supporting a family on visits. As suggested, you may accomplish this in casework meetings that include the parent and/or the child. It is valuable to make your expectations about the visit clear to the host and the parent together. Certainly, a host needs to know what you would like them to do if they feel a visit is not going well, which should always include the expectation that the host will end the visit and return the child to the foster home or the agency, depending on the arrangements you make. In advising the host, you may want to draw on expectations and guidance you provide to kinship foster parents who have visits in their home with a child’s parents.

The assigned caseworker or supervisor should always be present for the first few visits that take place with the host as a means to identify additional issues that may be important for assuring a safe, productive, positive visit for the family. Over the life of a case, it is recommended that the caseworker be present with the Visit Host from time to time to ensure that the support for the family continues and that people willing to support the family are not discouraged by what feels like burdensome limitations or conditions on their support of the family that go beyond assuring the child’s safety.
time to assess the arrangement. You should regularly check in with the Visit Host to find out about the progress of visits as well as to address any of the host’s concerns, in much the same manner as you would check in with a kinship foster parent who monitors visits in his/her home. Less frequent check-ins should be possible as the case progresses, if visits continue to go well.

It is important to regularly request feedback on the visiting arrangements from the child and parent. You may wish to set aside a specific casework meeting to discuss with the Host and with the parent and children their impressions of the visits. It is also important to interview children separately regarding their experience of the visits. You may wish to include the Visit Host at SPRs or similar casework meetings, with the parent’s consent.

F. Documentation Regarding Visits

Even when engaging a Visit Host, the agency remains responsible for documenting reasonable efforts around all service planning, including visits. It is not necessary nor is it recommended that Visit Hosts formally document their activities while supporting a visit, though you may wish to ask the host to keep a simple log that chronicles the dates and times of visits and perhaps briefly summarizes activities at the visit. It is necessary for the caseworker to regularly touch base with a Visit Host, to get feedback on the visits and to include that feedback in regular progress notes and service plans. Just as caseworkers regularly hear from kinship foster parents about visits that take place under their “supervision,” caseworkers should make provisions to solicit this feedback from the hosts, either after every visit or at regular intervals.

Visit Hosts do need to understand that in the event of a conflict or question regarding the accuracy of their feedback on visits, a caseworker may temporarily or permanently halt the arrangement, until the conflict can be adequately resolved. This should be indicated and included in any Visit Host contract or written agreement that is used and when discussed in lieu of a written agreement, the discussion should be documented in the progress notes. Naturally, progress notes should also reflect any feedback from parents and children.

If you choose to ask the Host to fill out a brief form or keep a log of visits, you should be sure to give the parent (and older children) the opportunity to record their impressions and feedback as well.

Conclusion

With proper exploration and application, Visit Hosts offer a promising approach to improving family visits, meeting the needs of children and families in foster care, and enhancing the network of support families can continue to rely on outside of the child
welfare system. We strongly encourage agencies to utilize these guidelines and to integrate Visit Hosts into standard case practice.