

Considerations for Access Visits Post-Admission

A child's admission to care represents a significant and sometimes traumatic event in a child's relationship with their caregivers. The event itself can be precipitated and followed by chaotic tasks and feelings...for the child, the parents, the family and the worker!

The first access visit arranged after admission is the family's first point of contact after the storm. As such, it is an important time to repair, establish and assess the family's strengths and challenges. This first visit can set the tone for the success of the family's ongoing visits and can likely have a positive or negative impact on how the child does in care. At the same time, there is recognition that the first visit comes at a chaotic time for the worker, AND often parents are still angry, sad or frustrated with their worker over the apprehension that just occurred.

Some factors to consider when planning the first visit:

- What was the nature of the admission? How might the child have experienced the events on the day of their admission, or leading up to? Was it scary? Confusing? Chaotic?
- How did the parent react to the separation? Were they able to stay calm and help the child? If not, are there things they can do now to repair that? (i.e. bring items the child left behind, apologize for the chaos, talk about the events, etc.)
- Research suggests that visits should occur within 48 hours of placement – this is not always possible, but is in the child's best interest.
- The primary purpose of these visits is to maintain the child's emotional attachments. Children often perceive limitations on contacts as punishment for something the child did.
- Where should the visit occur to make it safe AND comfortable for the family? Who should be present? Can the foster parent or worker bring the child in, instead of a stranger/driver?
- What were the child's experiences of their caregiver BEFORE they came into care? This visit is your first opportunity to assess and provide information to the foster parents.

Tips and Strategies for the First Visit:

- If possible, allow the child and parent a *phone call* as soon as possible after the placement, to encourage the maintenance of contact and to allow the child reassurance that the parent is safe. This call should be fully supported to ensure the parent is able to give the clear messages the child needs to hear.
- Parents should be encouraged to bring clothes, comfort items, school work, medicine, or family pictures to the first visit, and time can be set aside to talk about medical history, routines, traditions, cultural practices and other needs the child has, if they were not discussed at the time of admission.
- Meet with the parent for some time BEFORE the child arrives. This allows the parent to get their initial reactions and concerns out of the way prior to the child's arrival. It also allows you a chance to talk about what the child may have experienced during the admission, to prepare the parent for the child's questions and to talk with the parent about what the child might need to hear from them. Ask the parent "what do you want to say to the child about what happened? What do you think they might need to hear from you? How do you think the child might feel hearing that?"

- Providing the parent with information about the child's activities, foster home, etc. will help the parent feel reassured that the child is safe and doing ok. Things like what the foster parents' first names are, whether there are other children in the house, what the child has in their room, what the foster caregiver did to make the child comfortable when they arrived, etc.
- Talking to the caregivers about the purpose and importance of access helps them to understand that it is an opportunity for the family to have contact, for the parent to practice parenting skills and behaviours, and for the workers to support them. Let the parent know that an Access Plan will be created with them that will fit with their case service plan. For example, at the Intake level, the access plan would be to provide an opportunity for assessment, and an ongoing worker might adapt this plan to include tasks to be completed in access that work toward the Society's, parent's and child's goals for access.
- Parents can be encouraged to think about how they can reassure the child that the separation was not the child's fault. For example, you might tell the parent "you know, Joey is probably pretty confused by all this and might feel like it's his fault he came into care. What do you think you could tell him to reassure him that it's not?" Provide the parent with statements such as "I am so sorry this has happened to us, but I want to be sure you know that NONE of this is your fault", or "I wasn't able to take safe/proper/good care of you and that's why you came into care.. it is NOT your fault".
- Talk to the parent about how they might feel when they see the child for the first time, and what they are going to do with those feelings. For example, acknowledge that they might feel sad or cry when they see the child, and talk about how the child might experience this. Make a plan with the parent in the case they are NOT able to make it through the visit without becoming too emotional. Acknowledge their feelings BEFORE the visit, talking with them about what they are experiencing, and helping them organize themselves. Let them know that it's ok if they need to take a break, or that you'll let them know if you feel the child needs to be removed from the room.
- Provide parents with some orientation to the Access Centre, such as showing them where they'll find toys, dishes, etc. so that they can feel comfortable and confident when their child arrives.
- Facilitate some conversation during the visit about the admission by:
 - Acknowledging they haven't seen each other since that day, make it ok to talk about it.
 - Ask the child why they think they're in care, give a chance to talk about their experiences.
 - Ask the child (or, better yet, have the parents ask) if they have any questions about what happened or why they had to come into care. If the parents aren't able to verbalize reasons in a way that is safe for the child (talk beforehand to assess this), do so yourself, reassuring the child that the worker will be helping the parent to work on the problems that led to their admission.
- Help the family to talk about what they would like their time together to look like going forward. What are the child's goals for access? What are the parents' goals for access? Let them know that they will likely have an access worker to help them develop a plan. You can provide them the Access Plan Worksheet for parents and encourage them to share it with their ongoing worker once assigned.

- Help the family with their departure by encouraging the parents to talk to the children about what they'll do when they return to the foster home, how many "sleeps" until they see each other again, and what the child wants to do at their next visit, to assist the child with the transition.

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