

# Family Visitation: Key to Safe Reunification for Children in Foster Care



Children in foster care who visit regularly with their parents in a healthy environment are more likely to return safely home. New Jersey has historically performed poorly in this critical area, with a majority of foster children not receiving weekly visits with their parents.

It is also unclear whether the visits that do occur are of high-quality, with visits held in home-like environments, adequately supervised and documented and providing positive experiences for both children and parents. These factors are all key to successful reunification.

The latest report from the federal court-appointed monitor, which tracks progress in New Jersey's child welfare reforms, shows improvements. More than half

– 56 percent of children in foster care whose goal is to return home -- visited weekly with their parent(s) in December 2013, compared to 35 percent in December 2011.

To gather more information about

## Research has shown that quality visitation:

- Boosts chances that children will reunify with parents.
- Helps ensure that families remain together after reunification.
- Leads to shorter stays in foster care.
- Improves children's well-being while in care.

how family visitation is conducted in New Jersey, Advocates for Children of New Jersey conducted a survey in January 2014. About 450 people involved in the child protection system responded.



## Key findings include:

- Sixty-eight percent of survey respondents said parents and children had weekly visits either always (15%) or frequently (53%).
- Less than half of respondents said siblings had weekly visits while in foster care.
- Parents not showing for appointments, transportation and scheduling conflicts were the most commonly cited barriers to regular visitation.
- Sixty-five percent of respondents said visits were "always" or "frequently" appropriately supervised, with 21 percent saying this happened only "occasionally."
- Nearly half of respondents said that visits are "occasionally" or "rarely" held at locations that encourage positive interaction among parents and children.
- Less than half said judges "always" or "frequently" reviews families' visitation plans as the case progresses.

- About half said resource/foster parents are not adequately involved in visitation plans, nor are they kept informed about what happens during visits.

### Frequency of Visits

Fifteen (15) percent of respondents said parents and children in care “always” had weekly visits, while 53 percent said they “frequently” had visits. Occasional weekly visits were reported by 21 percent of respondents and 2 percent said children never visit weekly with their parents.

Sibling visitation was less likely to occur on a weekly basis. Less than half— 45 percent— of respondents said this was a constant or frequent occurrence, while 36 percent reported weekly sibling visitation as occasional. Additionally, 6 percent of respondents reported that children never get an opportunity to visit with their siblings.

### Involvement in the Child Welfare System

Role	% of Total Responders
CASA volunteers/supervisors	28%
Resource (foster) Parent	24%
Court-affiliated staff	16%
Other*	16%
Div. Child Protection & Permanency (DCPP) Staff	15%
Dept. Children & Families Staff (other than DCPP)	4%
Parent of child(ren) involved in child protection system	2%
N=633	
* Most common roles reported in 'other' include child care director, adoptive parent, social worker and visitation services.	
**Total percent may exceed 100 due to rounding	

### Barriers to Visitation

Since frequent, quality visits are critical to safe and successful family reunification, barriers to visits occurring must be identified and addressed.

## Court-settlement sets low bar for family visitation

New Jersey has seen some progress in the frequency of visitation for certain children in foster care.

The latest report from the court-appointed monitor, which is tracking the state’s progress in reforming its child protection system, found that more than half – 56 percent of children in foster care whose goal is to return home -- visited weekly with their parent(s) in December 2013, compared to 35 percent in December 2011.

Bi-weekly visits were more likely to occur, with 78 percent of children in care having these visits in December 2013, up from 61 percent in December 2011, according to the June 2014 report. Monthly visits among siblings have also improved to 71 percent of cases, compared to 49 percent in December 2011.

While this is positive, the settlement agreement, which drives New Jersey’s reforms, sets what is, arguably, a low bar for visitation. In addition, little information is publicly available to document how visits are conducted and the barriers to regular, healthy visitation. And, no information is available about visitation between parents and children who have a goal other than reunification, as the settlement does not require visitation in these cases.

Family Visitation	PERCENT MEETING STANDARDS				Change	Final Target	Meet Standards?
	Dec 2011	Jun 2012	Mar 2013	Dec 2013			
Parent/ child weekly visitation	35%	42%	59%	56%	Better	60%	No
Parent/ child, at least every other week	61%	68%	80%	78%	Better	85%	No
Sibling visitation	49%	52%	63%	71%	Better	85%	No

### Frequency of Weekly Visitation for Children in Foster Care

	Always	Freq.	Occ.	Never
Parent(s)	15%	53%	21%	2%
Sibling(s)	9%	36%	36%	6%

N= 457

\*Total percent may exceed 100 due to rounding

\*\*'N/A' column omitted

Survey respondents most frequently cited the following barriers to children visiting with parents:

- ☐ Parents failing to keep appointments (79 percent)
- ☐ Lack of transportation to visits (50 percent)
- ☐ Lack of weekend and/or evening visits (42 percent)

Other barriers less frequently mentioned include a child not wanting to visit with his or her parent(s), children's schedule were not coordinated with visits and lack of caseworker support for the visitation plan.

While it is easy to blame parents for failing to keep appointments to visit with their children, it is critical to look deeper at this issue. Why aren't parents keeping appointments? And are these reasons being accurately documented for case planning and court review of a parent's progress toward the stated goals? Are parents and children being adequately supported in accessing transportation? Are visits being scheduled around parents' work schedules or other obligations? Have parents been coached on the importance of visitation and ways to make this time meaningful and positive for both them and their children? Many reasons could exist to explain why parents do not always abide by visitation schedules. Yet, little discussion has publicly occurred about this critical issue.

In addition, the Division of Child Protection and Permanency must work to remove any logistical barriers to visitation. Clearly, transportation and appropriate scheduling that is considerate of both the parent and children's schedules are critical to ensure parents and children in care visit regularly.

### Most Common Barriers to Visitation for Children in Foster Care

#### Among Parents

Barrier	% of Total Parents
Parent fails to keep appointments	79%
Lack of transportation	50%
Lack of weekend/evening schedule	42%
Child does not want to visit with parent	31%
Child's schedule not coordinated with visits	28%
Lack of caseworker support for visits	26%
Scheduling conflicts of resource parent	23%
Other**	10%
None	4%

N= 455

\*\*Most common barriers reported in "other" include lack of resources, incarcerated parent and travel distance.

#### Among Siblings

Barrier	% of Total Siblings
Lack of transportation	52%
Lack of weekend/evening schedule	44%
Scheduling conflicts of resource parent	35%
Parent fails to keep appointments	31%
Lack of caseworker support for visits	31%
Child does not want to visit with siblings	16%
Other**	15%
None	11%

N= 449

\*\*Most common barriers reported in "other" include visits rarely scheduled, conflict of sibling's schedule and travel distance.

For visits between siblings, the primary barriers to weekly visitation identified were:

- ☐ Lack of transportation (52 percent)
- ☐ Lack of weekend and/or evening schedule (44 percent)
- ☐ Conflicts with the resource parent's schedule (35 percent)

Other, less frequently mentioned barriers include parents failing to keep appointments, lack of caseworker support and visits rarely being scheduled.

Again, DCPD can and must address these logistical issues to give children in care the opportunity to spend time with their siblings, a bond that can help improve their emotional health and ensure better long-term outcomes for these vulnerable children.

## Quality of Visits

While the frequency of visitation is important, the quality of those visits is paramount. More than half of respondents – 65 percent — said that visits were “always” or “frequently” appropriately supervised, whether it was by a child protection worker, family member or contract agency. While this is positive, nearly a quarter of respondents -- 23 percent – said adequate supervision happened “occasionally” or “never.”



Nearly half – 49 percent — said that attorney’s frequently raise the topic of visitation at court hearings, compared to 21 percent who cited this as happening “occasionally.”

When attorneys did raise the topic of visitation in court, the most common issues cited were expanding a visitation

schedule, (87%), requesting that visits be unsupervised (68%) and changing the location of visits (46%). Other issues commonly raised include urging a parent to adhere to a visitation schedule and restricting visits.

Court oversight of visitation is expected to improve

Frequency of Key Components in Visitation Plan					
	Always	Freq.	Occ.	Never	N/A
Appropriately supervised visits	24%	41%	21%	2%	12%
Judge reviews a child’s visitation plan	13%	29%	28%	4%	26%
Visits held at locations that encourage positive interaction	9%	29%	44%	5%	14%
Attorney’s raise topic of visitation at court hearing	14%	35%	21%	3%	27%
*N= 464					
**Total percent may exceed 100 due to rounding					

Of concern, nearly half – 49 percent — of respondents said that visits are occasionally or rarely held at locations that encourage positive interaction among parents and children, compared to 38 percent who cited this as a frequent occurrence.

## Reviewing Visitation Plans

As a family’s case progresses, it is critical that regular reviews be held to determine if visitation plans should be changed to better meet the needs of the child and family. Forty-two percent of respondents said judges “always” or “frequently” reviews families’ visitation plans, while 32 percent said judges “occasionally” or “never” do this.

with the recent approval of a “visitation bench card.” The bench card, developed by members of New Jersey’s statewide Children in Court Improvement Committee (CICIC), is a useful guide that includes the relevant law, questions to ask regarding the need for supervision and location and frequency of visits, as well as a decision tree to help judges create the most appropriate visitation plan for children and families. The bench card was recently approved by Judge Glenn Grant, director of the Administrative Office of the Courts. It is being distributed to all judges who handle child welfare cases.

The committee also developed a survey for Child Placement Review Boards, which conduct a review of cases at the 45-day mark. The board’s findings are provided to judges to help them make good decisions for the children and families involved in the cases. For the survey, review board volunteers collected information about visitation in their counties during their reviews. This information will help counties assess their progress in complying with the law and improving practices around visitation/parenting time.



Issues Typically Raised At Court Hearing	
Issue	% of Total Responders
Expand visitation schedule	87%
Request that visits be unsupervised	68%
Restrict visits	46%
Change location of visit	46%
Other**	10%
*N=310	
*Total percent may exceed 100 due to rounding	
**Most common issue reported in 'other' was urging parents to adhere to visitation schedule.	

### Other Critical Factors

Just 26 percent of respondents agreed that visits are regularly arranged with relatives who may be interested in caring for a child in foster care, while only 31 percent agreed that a child's reaction to visits is considered when decisions are made about the visitation plan. Additionally, just one-quarter agreed that more frequent visits are held for children under age five. Research shows that young children need more frequent visitation to establish bonds with their parents.

Nearly one-third of respondents disagreed that visits involving children under the age of five are more frequently held in therapeutic settings than for older children, while just 18 percent agreed that this occurs regularly.

When visits are supervised by someone other than child protection staff, only 17 percent said these visits are adequately documented – a concern as documentation of what occurs during visits is a critical piece to successful family reunification. In addition, about one-third of respondents – 35 percent — expressed that parents do not receive coaching or mentoring during visits, while 17 percent agreed that parents do receive some type of guidance.

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Factors in Visitation			
Factor	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know/Neutral
Parent/child visits involving children under the age of 5 are held more frequently than visits for older children in foster care.	24%	28%	49%
Parent/child visits involving children under the age of 5 are more frequently held in therapeutic settings than for older children in foster care.	18%	30%	52%
Visits are being arranged with relatives or other kin who may be interested in caring for a child.	26%	26%	48%
Parents receive coaching/mentoring during visits.	17%	35%	49%
Resource parents are frequently involved in visitation plans.	16%	47%	36%
Resource parents are kept informed about what happens during visits.	20%	44%	36%
Visits that are supervised by someone other than a child protection worker are accurately documented.	17%	28%	54%
A child's reaction to visits is considered when making decisions about visitation.	31%	31%	38%
*For each factor, N=453			
**Total percent may exceed 100 due to rounding			

### Resource Parents and Visitation

Many survey respondents said that resource/foster parents are not actively involved in visitation plans, nor are they kept informed of what occurs during visits. Nearly half – 44 percent— disagreed that resource parents are kept informed about what happens during visits, while 47 percent disagreed that resource parents are frequently involved in visitation plans. Just 20 percent of respondents said resource parents are kept informed about what happens during visits, while 16 percent said resource parents are frequently involved in visitation plans.

In a follow-up open-ended section, many respondents voiced their opinion on the involvement of resource parents in both planning and revising visitation schedules. A few said that not being included in this important planning process creates great inconveniences for resource parents. Respondents further explained that while the schedules of parents and children are often considered, the schedules of resource parents are not. According to the open-ended responses, resource parents are not often given a say in when visits should occur, nor are they made aware of when visits are scheduled.



### What resource parents said about visitation plans...

“I feel the resource parent(s) should be kept informed as to how the visit is working out for the child. The case worker should keep the resource parent updated as to whether the visit is in the best interest of the child, depending on the reason why the child was removed in the first place.”

“I was never informed about what happened at the visits. As a matter of fact, I was told that this information could not be discussed with the resource parents. I was later informed that the child was hysterical during every visit and visits were cut short.”

“I learned about my child's visits only because I specifically asked about what happened. I don't think the division feels it is important for the resource parent to know how the visit went and what they can do to help the child once he/she returns.”

“We are rarely informed as to what occurs during DCP&P supervised visits. [For] very young children, it is important that resource parents know what a child ate, when they napped, etc...”

### Summary

While New Jersey has made some progress in improving the frequency of visitation among parents and children in foster care, the quality of those visits is questionable and meaningful involvement of the courts and resource parents is still lacking, survey respondents said.

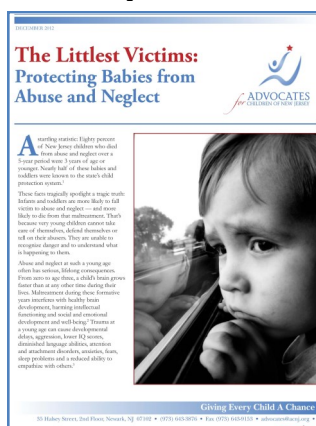
In addition, the federal court settlement agreement, which is driving New Jersey's child protection reforms, sets a low bar for family visitation, requiring just 60 percent of children with a goal of family reunification to have weekly visits and 80 percent to have at least biweekly visits.

The settlement imposes no visitation requirements for children whose goal is not reunification. Until termination of parental rights occurs, it is important for children to retain ties with their parents, assuming, of course, this is not detrimental to the child. In some cases, the case goal may change to reunification, making ongoing visitation essential. Even if the goal remains adoption or some other permanent home, research shows that visiting with parents helps children accept the transition to another family and let go of their family of origin.



Another concern is that the settlement standards set the same frequency of visitation for infants and toddlers as for older children. Research proves that younger children need more frequent visitation to form bonds with their parents – bonds that are critical to an eventual safe reunion. In ACNJ's December 2012 policy brief, *The Littlest Victims: Protecting Babies from Abuse and Neglect*, ACNJ recommended increasing the frequency of visitation for very young children and their parents to three times per week, not the current once-a-week requirement.

Last, while visit frequency is important, the quality of those visits is paramount. Are families meeting in a room at a Division of Child Protection and Permanency office? Or are they meeting in a home-like environment with opportunities for normal interaction? If visits need to be supervised, are they guided by a trained professional? When appropriate, are parents able to visit overnight with their children? These and other questions must be publicly addressed.



## Recommendations

- The Department of Children and Families should establish policy and practice to provide more parent and sibling frequent visitation for infants and toddlers. The goal should be three visits per week with parent(s) and siblings, unless safety is a concern.
- The federal court and monitor overseeing the child welfare case should reach an agreement with the state to strengthen visitation standards for young children and those whose goal is not family reunification. These standards should be measured in the same way other requirements of the settlement agreement are in the monitor's bi-annual reports.
- DCF and the monitor should conduct an analysis of the barriers to visitation and develop a plan to address those barriers. Resource parents and other stakeholders should be involved in that assessment and the development of a plan.
- DCF and the monitor should conduct an analysis of the quality of visitation, including the location and duration of visits, supervision of visits, coaching of parents and other key elements of quality visitation.
- DCF must meet the logistics of arranging visits, including providing transportation for both parents and children. Ideally, children should be consistently transported by the same caseworker or aide to provide stability for these children who are already struggling with adapting to significant change.
- DCF should more actively involve resource parents in visitation plans, keep them informed of what occurs during visits and, when appropriate, involve resource parents in the visits themselves.