



You and Your Foster Child

Changes in Children's Behavior Before and After Parent Visits

Visits between foster children and their biological parents are important. These visits allow children to maintain contact with their birth family. Studies suggest that the more of these visits foster children have, the more positively they view their birth parents and the shorter their stays in foster care are likely to be. These visits also help social workers and juvenile courts gauge how well birth parents are responding to efforts to help them regain custody and what additional steps might be necessary to return the child to the family.

However, these visits can be difficult for foster children, birth parents, and foster parents. Birth parents, for example, may not understand the importance of these visits, and that could affect their willingness to visit and their behavior during visits. Foster parents may not like the birth parents or feel their role is threatened by them. For a number of reasons, children can suffer before, during, and after visits with their birth parents.

Unfortunately, foster parents often are the ones who must cope with the child's issues and behavior, as well as their own feelings, when these visits do not go well.

Understanding a foster child's response to birth parent visits

There are no foolproof ways to guarantee that visits between foster children and their birth parents will be successful. But knowing about behaviors you might see in your foster child and taking a few steps to prepare your child and facilitate the visit should help.

Before-visit symptoms

Foster children can be affected by knowing that a visit with their birth parents is approaching. Here are some of the symptoms you might see in your child before the visit:

- Nightmares and sleep disturbances.
- Unrealistic expectations about how the visit will go.
- Anxiety.

After-visit symptoms

Children can experience a variety of feelings after visiting with their birth parents. They also might behave in ways that are difficult to cope with. Feelings and behaviors you might see from your foster child after a visit include:

- Nightmares and sleep disturbances.
- Crying, sometimes excessively.
- Sadness.
- Disappointment.
- Acting out, such as stomping feet, displaying antisocial behavior, and ignoring foster family members.
- Anger.
- Ambivalence.
- Withdrawal.
- Anxiety.

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Preparing for the visit

It is important to do what you can to prepare your foster children for a visit with birth parents. Here are some suggestions:

- Make the necessary changes in your family’s schedule to accommodate the visit.
- Work with the birth parents to plan and schedule visits.
- Keep your child informed of planned visits.
- Have some special before-visit rituals to comfort the child, such as arranging special clothes or fixing the child’s hair in a particular way.
- Be realistic with your foster child about which family members will and will not be at the visit—for example, mom only, mom and dad, grandparents, etc.
- Be open about which nonfamily members will be at the visit. These might include a social worker, other case-workers, yourself, etc.
- Provide extra emotional support to your child before the visit.
- Make a game out of before-visit time. You might, for example, let your foster children “play social worker” by having them ask questions and play the role.
- Find out what your foster child would like to do at the visit and try to arrange the activity. If his or her idea is not realistic, work with him or her to come up with a more practical plan.
- Talk to your foster children about any items—toys, books, etc.—they would like to take to the visit.

Facilitating visits

You always should try your best to make visits between your foster children and their birth parents go smoothly. Here are a few steps you can take that might help:

- Try to have the visit take place in your home or in the birth parents’ home rather than in an agency office.
- Volunteer to provide transportation to and from visits.
- Help birth parents by being a model of appropriate parenting behavior.
- Reinforce the birth parents’ confidence in their parenting skills when they show positive change.
- Respect the birth parents, and treat them fairly.
- When appropriate or necessary, observe visits.
- Be careful when talking about the birth parents. Try to be positive.
- Always discuss negative actions of the parents during visits in terms of the choices the parents made. Do not use blaming language.

After-visit support

There may be some circumstances that occur that need attention after the visit. Here are some suggestions for handling the period after a visit:

- Talk to your foster child about how the visit went.
- Let the child talk about how he or she feels about the visit and parents.
- Encourage questions about the visit or the foster situation. Answer them as honestly as possible.
- Reassure your foster children about any issues they might be concerned about.
- Ask your child what kinds of activities he or she would like to do at the next visit.
- Explain that you understand it can be difficult to visit parents for a little while and then have to leave them again.
- If possible, let your foster child know when the next visit is scheduled.
- Spend additional time nurturing your foster child and showing extra affection. Do this regardless of how the visit went, but especially when a visit does not go well.
- If your foster child is consistently unhappy or distressed after visits, report this to the social worker.
- Report any suspicion of child abuse immediately.

When a visit is canceled

A canceled visit can be hard on a child. Here are ways to support your foster child when that happens:

- Provide additional comforting when visits are canceled, for whatever reason.
- When telling your foster child about a canceled visit, do not blame. Simply explain that the parent made certain choices, the social worker had to reschedule, etc.
- Assure your foster child that he or she is not the reason the visit was canceled, he or she did not do anything wrong, and he or she is still loved.
- Try to do the activity with the child that was planned with the parents, if possible.
- Spend extra time with your foster child.

When to seek professional help

Changes in a child’s behavior after a visit do not necessarily mean the visit hurt the child. The change might, for example, mean the child has a secure attachment with the parent and that he or she is upset about having to leave the parent again. However, if behavior changes are severe or overly disruptive to the foster family, professional help may be necessary, and the situation should be brought to the attention of the child’s social worker.

