

**Report to the Legislature
Parent Child Visitation
Department of Social and Health Services**

Chapter 4, Laws of 2015, Sec. 202(14)
Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 6052

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Children's Administration
Division of Program and Policy
PO Box 45710
Olympia, WA 98504-5710
(360) 902-8400



Department of Social and Health Services Legislative Report on Parent Child Visitation

This report document has been prepared in accordance with the following budget proviso in Chapter 4, Laws of 2015, Sec. 202(14) (ESB 6052):

(14) The children's administration shall adopt policies to reduce the percentage of parents requiring supervised visitation, including clarification of the threshold for transition from supervised to unsupervised visitation prior to reunification. The children's administration shall submit the revised visitation policy to the appropriate policy and fiscal committees of the legislature by December 1, 2015.

Children's Administration (CA) convened a workgroup to examine current parent child visitation policy. The workgroup met over the course of two days in late August and early September 2015 and included representatives from:

- Washington State Court Appointed Special Advocate Program (CASA)
- Parents 4 Parents Program
- Office of Public Defense
- Administrative Office of the Courts
- Dependency Court Judges and Commissioners
- Partners for our Children
- Attorney General's Office
- Alliance for Child Welfare Excellence
- CA

The workgroup recognized that revising policy would be more complex and involved than originally anticipated and developed the problem statement below as a first step toward addressing the complexities of visitation:

"[There is] An over-reliance on supervised visitation and a lack of understanding and clear knowledge of what to consider when determining the level of supervision."

The identification of this problem led to policy changes and recommendations from the workgroup that could improve the visitation experience for parents and their children. In response to the proviso, CA prioritized establishing the criteria for supervised visitation and the necessary revisions in policy. These revisions will require additional work to support the changes.

Once this first phase of work is completed, CA will begin Phase II: Addressing recommendations made by the workgroup including visitation services, use of evidence-based practice and coaching, visitation with relatives, transportation, and how to provide visitation in the least restrictive setting possible. There may be models of visitation used by other states to consider. The CA will continue to work with members of the workgroup to develop Phase II recommendations.

Phase I: Policy Revision and Implementation

Policy Revision

Level of Supervision:

Policy changes address the level of supervision necessary to assure child safety. The level of supervision in the initial plan and recommended to the court in the visitation plan should be in the least restrictive setting and based on risk factors, existing danger, safety threats and protective factors.

Supervised visitation will be provided in the initial visits and be recommended to the court when the following conditions exist and the physical, psychological, or emotional safety of the child requires the constant presence of a visitation supervisor:

1. The allegations of abuse or neglect of the child resulted in injuries requiring medical treatment, evaluation, or assessment. This includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect.
2. The abuse appears to be deliberate and premeditated.
3. The allegations of abuse included multiple victims.
4. The parent can provide no plausible explanation for their child's injury.
5. The child is allegedly sexually abused.
6. The child expresses or demonstrates extreme fear of their parent.
7. The parent's view of their child is bizarre or unusual to the degree that what they say, about or to the child, causes emotional or psychological harm. Examples include the parent's belief that the child is possessed, is a threat to the parent.
8. There is an active law enforcement investigation of the abuse or neglect.
9. The parent is unable to provide the basic care required for a child based on the child's development, special need or disability.
10. The parent will flee with the child.

Some of the conditions may require that the supervised visit occur in a secure location. If the parent is dangerous or expresses threats toward the child, visits will be suspended until those dangers or threats can be provided to the court.

Expanding opportunities for contact:

Additional methods of contact including Skype, email, face time or phone calls will be used when an in-person visit cannot take place or as a supplement to in-person visitation. These other forms of contact can be used as part of a step-down plan toward reunification.

Visitation with incarcerated parents:

Specific language has been added to clarify that a written visitation plan will be developed for incarcerated parents and that incarceration is not a reason to deny visitation unless a court order exists limiting or prohibiting contact.

Visitation Plan:

Policy will now require ongoing assessment and modification of the visitation plan. The visitation plan will continue to be assessed and modified in consultation with the parent(s), caregivers, the parent's natural supports, tribal workers (as applicable) and CASA (if appointed) at shared planning meetings. The level of supervision for visitation cannot be linked to a parent's participation or compliance with court ordered services.

The level of supervision at visits will also be reviewed at monthly supervisor case reviews to determine if an increase or decrease in supervision is appropriate. If the visitation is supervised and the child is returning home within 90 days, a step-down visitation plan to include frequency of visits must be developed.

Visitation documentation:

The initial written plan is developed within three calendar days of placement and covers the first 30 to 60 days of out-of-home care unless otherwise ordered by the court. CA caseworkers will document visits into FamLink by the 10th day of the next month following the visit. This will allow CA to track data trends and accuracy of payments for visitation services. Caseworkers are required to observe a minimum of one visit per quarter until the permanent plan has been achieved.

Policy Implementation

In addition to revisions to the policy, the following activities are necessary to support and successfully implement the changes. CA anticipates that this work will be completed by June 2016.

1. Updates to the visitation template and linking it to the service referral being created in the CA electronic case management system (FamLink). This will provide CA with the ability to retrieve data on visitation type, paid and unpaid visitation, and support budget forecasting for supervised and monitored visitation costs.

2. Training updates with a deliberate effort to shift culture and tie decision-making on the level of supervision needed to the existence of safety threats. This training will also include the step-down of supervised visits to monitored or unsupervised visits as the child transitions home.
3. The Parent Child Visitation guide will be updated to reflect policy changes, the procedure for visitation services referral, and provide additional information on determining the level of supervision through the use of shared planning with families, location for visits, and transportation.
4. Updates to visitation contracts with service providers.

Phase II: Workgroup Recommendations

Services During Visitation

CA currently provides evidence-based services for parent-child visitation. Promoting First Relationships (PFR) is used most frequently during visits. PFR is an evidence-based practice for children birth to three years old and their parents. PFR focuses on improving and strengthening parents' relationship with their child by teaching parents how to respond to their child in a sensitive manner.

The workgroup identified parent coaching during visits as a service that could enhance the quality of the visitation and assist parents in strengthening their relationship with their child.

Recommendations from the workgroup included:

1. Identifying evidence-based coaching programs that work for all ages of children.
2. Ensuring the coaching was not being done at all visits. Families need unstructured time.
3. Developing an assessment tool or criteria to identify families who need the coaching support.
4. Funding.

As a first step, CA will explore the use of parent coaching in child welfare systems, looking for evidence-based or best practices, costs associated with coaching and necessary additional resources.

Visitation and Maintaining Relationships with Relatives

Placement with relatives and kin is the first consideration for CA caseworkers when children need to be placed out-of-home. When children have relationships with relatives, maintaining the relationship through visitation has great potential to support the emotional and psychological health of children, stabilize placement, and reduce length of stay. The CA has begun exploring how to meet

the needs of relative caregivers and visitation with relatives will be included in that work.

Transportation

Transportation costs are woven into visitation. As the visitation policy is implemented, the cost of transportation will be addressed. There are options to relying on transportation paid to a contracted visitation provider. Some include allowing relatives, kin or another family support to transport. Considerations include mileage reimbursement, insurance, and liability.

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