

Rise TIPS



MAKING THE MOST OF VISITS

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Winning Him Back

My visits proved I was worth my son's trust

BY LYNNE MILLER

When ACS took my son away from me I felt like my world had ended.

At our first visit, I think I went into shock. My son and I spent nearly the whole visit crying all over each other.

Maybe it was the guilt I was feeling, but I felt I could see the mistrust in my son's eyes. I didn't know how I would be able to win back his trust.

The worst part was when I heard him call the foster mother "mom." I flipped out. The worker and foster mom tried to reassure me that I still was and would always be his mom. But I felt sure that the workers wanted to keep my child from me.

I left in a daze, like I was in a bad dream in slow motion.

GUILT AND CONFUSION

After that, I began coming to a parent support group at my agency to ask questions and get information. I also came to know my son's foster mother and she made our visits go easier by assuring my son that he'd be going home someday soon.

Still, seeing my son only for visits took a toll. I no longer knew how to act or what to say around him. I tried to make it up by bringing gifts to every visit. But then I would wonder whether he was happy to see me or the gifts. The worst part was saying good-bye.

That's when all my guilt and remorse really set in.



STARTING TO HEAL

I think my showing up consistently for our visits started the healing process. It helped to show my son that I could be trusted again. If I told him I would be at the agency to see him in two weeks, and then I showed up, he knew I was reliable and kept my word. It also showed the agency that I was capable of being a responsible parent again.

Eventually, our visiting time was increased. Then I was able to take him for overnights, then weekends. Finally, after almost 18 months of hard work, I got him back.

DID YOU KNOW

Most families begin with supervised visits. The more you make progress in your case and show that you can stay calm, loving and playful, the more visit time you're likely to get with your children.

TIP

It can be upsetting to hear how a caseworker sees your parenting, but if you can stay calm, ask your caseworker what she sees going well and whether she has concerns. The more quickly you deal with problems, the more quickly you'll get more time with your children.

TIP

Focus only on your relationship with your child during visits. Being on your phone or talking about your case can make you seem disconnected. Try to calm down so you can be loving and playful and help your child feel safe.

A Time to Bond

Parent-to-parent tips for handling supervised visits

BY JACQUELINE ISRAEL, A PARENT ADVOCATE
WHOSE CHILDREN WERE IN FOSTER CARE

BRING TOYS AND GAMES

1 When you visit at the agency, the room just isn't a home environment. Bring games, coloring books, toys, crayons, and books to read to your child. You can even play soft music and bring a visiting blanket to play on the floor. If you're not sure what the rules are in the visiting room, ask your caseworker.

EXPECT YOUR KIDS TO ACT UP

2 It's normal for a child to feel angry or scared about being in foster care, or to feel sad and confused about being apart from you, and to act up as a result. When a child is acting up, we start thinking, "Why is this happening? Is someone hurting my child?" You might feel very scared that you can't help your child, or even angry or explosive. But you can help your children by staying calm, reassuring them that you're working to get them home, and letting them know that you love them even when you're not together.

MAKE VISITS A TIME TO BOND

3 Sometimes I see parents and kids sitting far apart, or kids playing videogames. But visits are a time to strengthen the bond you have with your child. You want to get down on the floor, play and talk with your kids. They miss you and need your full attention and love.

Don't use your visits to complain or speak to agency staff. That takes quality time away from your child.

KEEP VISITING AND IT WILL GET EASIER

4 Sometimes parents say, "It's just too hard to visit my child at the agency." But you need to prove that you care about your child. If you don't visit, you can permanently lose your child. You and your child will feel better if you spend more time together. Even a week apart can feel like forever to a child, because children are having new experiences every day. Do your best to bond with your child, and the visits will get easier.



DON'T MAKE PROMISES YOU CAN'T KEEP

5 One of the hardest moments is when children ask, "When am I coming home?" Be as honest as you can be, while keeping in mind the child's age. Tell your children, "I wish I could take you home right now, but I can't. I'm working on it, and I'll take you home as soon as possible." Don't make promises that you can't keep. If you say, "You'll be home next week," and it doesn't happen, your child won't know who to trust.

BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FOSTER MOM

6 You can help your child and your case by being polite to the foster parent. At visits, say, "Hello. How are my kids? How are they in school?" Even if all you can do is say hello, keep it positive and speak to your caseworker privately about any concerns.

HELP YOUR CHILDREN SAY GOODBYE

7 Parents and their children don't want visits to end. Children don't understand why they can't go home. They cry, have fits. Don't let goodbyes go on and on. When it's almost time to leave, say, "It's time for us to go now. Please take care. I'll see you soon." Help your children say goodbye, and leave your child with the foster parent or caseworker.

TAKE CARE OF YOU

8 Leaving visits can feel lonely and discouraging. Think about what makes you feel good—a phone call or visit with a friend, a walk—and set that up in advance.



TIPS is brought to you by the parents at Rise, which trains parents to write and speak about their experiences with the foster care system.

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