

	GEORGIA DIVISION OF FAMILY AND CHILDREN SERVICES CHILD WELFARE POLICY MANUAL		
	Chapter:	(10) Foster Care	Effective Date: August 2014
	Policy Title:	Visitation	
	Policy Number:	10.19	Previous Policy #: 1002.28, 1009.4, .5, .9 & 1009.10

CODES/REFERENCES

O.C.G.A § Section 19-7-3
O.C.G.A § Section 15-11-2(33)
O.C.G.A § Section 15-11-26
O.C.G.A § Section 15-11-112

REQUIREMENTS

When a child is removed from his or her home, the court shall order reasonable visitation that is consistent with the age and developmental needs of a child if the court finds that it is in a child's best interest. The court's order shall specify the frequency, duration, and terms of visitation including whether or not visitation shall be supervised or unsupervised.

NOTE: There shall be a presumption that visitation will be unsupervised unless the court finds that unsupervised visitation is not in a child's best interest.

The Division of Family and Children and Services (DFCS) shall make a request to the court that visitation be supervised, monitored or otherwise restricted when child safety cannot be reasonably assured during unsupervised visits.

DFCS shall arrange for each child who enters foster care to have a face-to-face family (parent/caregiver and sibling) visit **no later than** seven (7) calendar days from the date of removal unless the court restricts such visitation. If the child is placed out of state or a significant distance (more than 75 miles) away from the family, the initial contact may be by telephone or [Skype](#).

DFCS shall develop a written visitation plan as part of the Case Plan to support continued contact between the child and parents, siblings, and significant others in the child's life. At a minimum, parents should visit bi-weekly (every two weeks) with their children, unless the court has specified another visitation arrangement. (See [Parent-Child Visitation](#) for recommended frequency)

DFCS shall allow visitation by other family members, friends, or [fictive kin](#) with whom the child has had a significant, positive relationship, if it is deemed to be in the best interest of the child.

DFCS shall document all visitation plans under the Visitation Plan Tab in Georgia SHINES.

Within 30 calendar days of the court finding that there is a lack of substantial progress towards completion of a case plan, the court shall review the terms of visitation and determine whether

the terms continue to be appropriate for a child or whether the terms need to be modified. DFCS shall update the visitation plan accordingly.

DFCS shall require placement providers to obtain DFCS approval prior to allowing a child in DFCS custody to spend the night with anyone other than the approved foster care provider (i.e., sleepovers).

PROCEDURES

The DFCS Social Services Case Manager (SSCM) will:

1. At the time of removal, make a recommendation to the court regarding the appropriateness of unsupervised visitation consistent with the child's best interest. Ensure the court's response is documented in the court order and in the Legal Detail in Georgia SHINES.
2. At the time of removal, reassure all household members that visitation with the child being removed from the home will occur on a regular basis and that arrangements will be made to schedule a face-to-face visit within **seven calendar days** unless there are court-ordered restrictions.
3. Contact the birth family and the placement resource **no later** than three calendar days from the date of removal to schedule the initial visit.

NOTE: It is recommended that the initial parent-child visits occur within 24 hours of removal.

- a. Parents/Caregivers (both mother and father): Discuss the details of the initial visit (time, date, location, level of supervision and attendees). Identify other committed adults who may visit with the child(ren).
- b. Child (ren): Discuss other committed individuals with whom the child would like to stay connected. Reassure child the initial visit is in the process of being scheduled.
- c. Placement resource: Discuss who will transport the child to the visit, the level of supervision required, who will provide supervision and the role the placement resource is expected to play during the visitation (e.g. provide supervision).
4. After the initial visit, develop a formal, written visitation plan that will be followed for the duration of the case, or until a change is needed.
5. Consider the following when scheduling parent – child visitation:
 - a. Age of the child: Younger children require more frequent visits to develop or maintain bonding with parents/caregivers;
 - b. Permanency plan for the child: May require more frequent visitation to facilitate reunification;
 - c. Least restrictive setting that does not compromise child safety (e.g., parks, playgrounds, etc.);
 - d. Child's eating, sleeping, activity patterns, and after school activities;
 - e. Parent's work schedule or other responsibilities;
 - f. Activities and responsibilities of the placement resource;
 - g. Providing parenting opportunities: Ways to involve parents in routine/regular activities of parenting such as feeding, changing diapers and other direct care responsibilities, attending child's school functions, medical appointments, sports activities, etc.
6. Observe the child's visits with the birth family to assess parenting skills, attachment, and interaction of the parent and child. Providers and foster parents may help supervise visits,

but are no substitute for SSCM observations. When providers are utilized for supervision of visits, written documentation is required.

7. Discuss with parents, child, and placement providers any observations, issues or concerns surrounding the visits.
8. In accordance with court guidelines for visitation, supervise a child's visits with individuals other than the parent.
 - a. Assess attachment, interaction, and the presence of any potential safety threats;
 - b. Screen Georgia SHINES for Child Protective Services (CPS) history and Sexual Offender Registry on adults (age 18 or older).
9. Require placement providers to obtain DFCS approval prior to allowing a child in DFCS custody to spend the night with anyone other than the approved foster care provider (i.e., sleepovers). A criminal background check and home safety check must be completed unless the individual is an approved DFCS foster home or has an approved Relative Care Assessment (RCA).
10. Increase the frequency and duration of family visits as the case progresses closer to reunification in accordance with court guidelines for visitation.
11. In accordance with court guidelines for visitation, allow visitation in the home of the parent as a step in transitioning the child from the placement resource back into the parent's home. The child's safety during home visits must be reasonably assured.

If a parent objects to any individual having visits with their child while in DFCS custody, the SSCM will:

1. Evaluate the reasons for the parent's objection.
2. Assess the significance of the child's relationship to the individual and the impact on the child if visits were not allowed.
3. Determine if visitation with the individual in question is contrary to the safety or well-being of the child.
4. Obtain supervisory approval and provide written justification to the court for any decision to override a parent's objection.
5. In accordance with court guidelines for visitation, ensure the visits with the individual in question are supervised.

PRACTICE GUIDANCE

A child's confusion and anxiety can be greatly reduced by arranging some form of contact with birth family as soon as possible following placement. Doing so reassures a child that the parent is still available and concerned about him/her. Another psychological advantage for the child is that he/she senses parental "permission" for being placed away from the parent. This alleviates much of the guilt most children feel when placed. As always, safety of the child is a paramount concern when considering the benefits of parent-child contacts.

The SSCM has the responsibility to reach out to parents and assure that a pattern of regular visitation is established early in placement. The younger the child, the more frequent visitation is needed for the child to maintain a relationship with the parent. Parents may require strong encouragement and support to exercise their visitation rights. The parent who misses visits, shows up late, seems disinterested, etc., may be experiencing great discomfort at having to continually face the reality of having the child taken away. The parent may respond to a better understanding of how important visitation is to the child when encouraged by the SSCM. Visits

should be planned to allow meaningful [parent/child interaction](#) and the development of a positive relationship between the family and the resource parents.

Open dialogue around the issue of visitation needs to be maintained among all parties involved. Visitation between the parents and child may be stressful. The reasons for placement and separation may surface, along with strong feelings on the part of both the parent and child around those issues. Typically, the child will express his feelings through his/her behavior prior to or following a visit (e.g., aggressiveness, temper tantrums, bed-wetting, angry outbursts, crying, etc.). A child who is particularly upset by visits may need additional assistance and support to verbalize his/her feelings about the parent, the reasons he/she is in care, and expectations regarding having visits with his/her family, etc.

Visits provide caregivers with opportunities to practice appropriate parenting behavior and obtain feedback. It provides the agency opportunities to assess parental readiness and capacity for reunification, which is documented in the case record and Case Plan. When supervising visits, the SSCM is able to assess how visitation affects the parent and the child, as well as the quality of the interaction.

An incarcerated parent and parents living out of county/state retain visitation rights. It may be necessary for DFCS to arrange for or to provide transportation where agency resources permit. Pre-planning the visit with the parent/caregiver, child and placement resource may be helpful. If the caregiver has difficulties in relating to the child, the agency may be able to assist the caregiver in developing more meaningful ways of interacting with or relating to the child by incorporating activities, games, etc. The parent and child may also need assistance in understanding when and how to end a visit and say good-bye. Post-visit discussions with the child, parent and placement resource may be helpful when planning for the next visit. Professional validation is needed from a licensed therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist before making a determination that visitation with parents, grandparents, siblings, etc. is detrimental to a child's well-being.

Parent-Child Visitation (Parenting Opportunities)

Limited contact between parents and their children is often anxiety provoking for children, and therefore more frequent visitation with their parents is best. Parents who visit frequently with their children have the best chance of being reunified with them. Visitation helps to facilitate bonding between parent and child, and provides opportunities for parents to “practice” parenting their children. Involving foster parents in developing the parent-child visits further promotes supportive relationships with the child and birth family. Other parenting opportunities should be provided for parents to “practice” learned skills/knowledge that can facilitate earlier reunification. Examples of other forms of meaningful contact include letters, cards, calls, email, Skype, social media, etc. Telephone contact is also encouraged, when it is safe and appropriate to do so. Discussions regarding the type and frequency of contacts should occur on an ongoing basis as the case progresses. The following table describes the recommended frequency of parent-child visitation:

AGE OF CHILD	FREQUENCY OF VISITS
Birth to 2 years	3 times weekly
2 years to 5 years	2 times weekly
6 years and older	Weekly

Photographs

During visitation, DFCS staff and service providers should take the opportunity to photograph a child's interaction with their parents, siblings, extended family, friends, etc. Each child should be encouraged to add the photographs to their Life Book, which will offer a record of their experiences in foster care. Photographs may also help provide parents with additional motivation to take the steps necessary to reunify their family as soon as possible.

Skype

Skype is a service that allows users to communicate with other people over the internet by voice (using a microphone), by video (using a webcam), and instant messaging. There is no charge for calls between users within the Skype service. However, there is a charge for calls to landline telephones and mobile devices. Charges are processed via a debit-based user account system.

Grandparents' Rights to Visit

Should DFCS not grant grandparent visitation, a grandparent has the legal right according to O.C.G.A. Section 19-7-3, to petition the court for visitation rights with a minor child when:

1. The minor child's parents are divorced;
2. The parental rights of either parent have been terminated;
3. The parent of the child is deceased; or
4. The child has been adopted by the child's blood relative or by a step-parent.

Reasonable visitation rights between the grandparent and the child may be granted if the court finds:

1. The health or welfare of the child would be harmed unless such visitation is granted; and
2. The best interest of the child would be served by granting the visitation request.

NOTE: "Grandparent" (as used in this provision of the law) refers to the parent of a minor child's parent; the parent of a minor child's parent who has died, or the parent of a minor child's parent whose parental rights have been terminated.

Fictive Kin

"Fictive kin" means a person who is known to a child as a relative, but is not, in fact, related by blood or marriage to such child **and** with whom such child has resided or had significant contact.

FORMS AND TOOLS

N/A