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Social Services County Letter No. 2012- 07

To: County Departments of Family and Children Services
DFCS Regional Directors
State Staff

From: Ron Scroggy, Division Director
Division of Family and Children Services

Re: The Quality of Every Child Every Month (ECEM) Visits and Resource Development Case Manager Contacts in Foster Homes

Date: October 19, 2012

PURPOSE

The purpose of this county letter is to highlight practice changes regarding the quality of Every Child Every Month (ECEM) visits and Resource Development Case Manager's Contacts in Foster Homes. This county letter establishes this change in policy pending the updates in the Online Directives Information System (ODIS) of the Social Services Policy Manual.

DISCUSSION

Case managers are aware of the importance of their relationship with a child and that this relationship should strengthen with each purposeful visit between the case manager and the child. Knowing the importance of this relationship, it only makes sense that the other relationships that a child in foster care establishes are equally important and should be assessed.

As part of assessing the safety and well-being of a child in DFCS custody, Permanency Case Managers are required to see all children in foster care monthly. Most of these visits are occurring in the child's placement setting and involve discussion with the primary foster parent and the child in foster care. However, are the quality of these visits providing us the information we need to make sound casework decisions? Can we describe the relationships between the child in foster care and other household members residing in the foster home? Does our documentation support how the child in foster care has been integrated into the already existing family?

In order to thoroughly assess a child's safety and well-being while in out-of-home care, it is important to assess the functioning of the family that is caring for the

child. Some key principles around good practice to keep in mind when conducting a quality assessment include:

1. **Recognizing the family providing care as a system.** Each member of the family, including the child in foster care, has a role and responsibilities within the family. If any one person is unable to fulfil their responsibilities, then the whole family is impacted.
2. **Engagement and relationship-building.** Purposeful visits are not only about engaging and building a relationship with the child in foster care, but also about engaging and building a relationship with the family who has taken the child into their home.
3. **Involvement of families and youth.** Because each member of a family has a role and responsibilities, it is essential to obtain input from all family members when assessing family functioning. When family members are engaged, this will re-affirm their importance in ensuring the success of the family system.
4. **Recognizing all children are individuals.** Any child (whether biological, adopted or in foster care) residing in the foster home will adjust differently to the changing circumstances associated with foster care. It is important to recognize the individuality of each child (whether biological, adopted or in foster care) and the impact that foster care has on their lives.
5. **Cultural awareness.** Each family has their own culture; therefore, when a child in foster care enters an already existing family, his/her culture is merging with another culture. Culture impacts family rituals and traditions. As family functioning is assessed, we must be respectful of all cultures involved and how they impact the functioning of the family..
6. **Empathy, authenticity and transparency.** During any contact with our children in foster care or those family members in the home where they reside, we should be mindful of these three words: empathy, authenticity and transparency. When engaging the child in foster care, his caregivers and anyone else in the home, we must be able to identify with their thoughts and feelings even though we may not always agree. We also must be genuine and open in our communication with all family members and recognize that we have some accountability regarding the success or failure of each foster care placement. Purposeful visits are also a time for foster parents to hold us accountable for what we may or may not be doing on behalf of the child in care and/or on behalf of their family who has partnered with us.
7. **Remaining focused on safety, permanency and well-being throughout the process.**

How can you tell when a family is functioning well? Some characteristics identified with a well-functioning family include: support, love, mutual caring, security, a sense of belonging, open communication, and making each person within the family feel valued. Other qualities to consider when determining whether or not a family is functioning well include:

1. Does the family have fun together despite their daily demands? What activities do they do together? What were they doing the last time they laughed together as a family? Does the family sit down to meals

- together?
2. Are there family rules that are clear and apply equally to all members? Are these rules flexible enough to adapt to a change in the family dynamics/situation?
 3. Are expectations of each other within the family realistic, mutually agreed upon and usually met?
 4. Do family members achieve their goals and are their needs being met? Do the child(ren) in foster care have the same opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities as the biological or adopted children in the placement? How does each foster parent spend individual time with each child?
 5. Is there genuine respect between the parents and children? How do they demonstrate love, trust, concern for one another? Do they demonstrate these the same way even when disagreements occur?
 6. How does the family adapt to change? Do household members get upset or unhappy with change?

IMPLEMENTATION

During Every Child Every Month(ECEM) visits, the SSCM shall:

1. Consider the good practice principles of assessing family functioning and be mindful of the qualities of a well-functioning family when conducting your purposeful visits.
2. Continue to conduct a purposeful visit with the child(ren) in DFCS custody (See Foster Care Policy 1011).
3. Engage each foster parent separately to obtain feedback on the child, the agency and the impact of the placement on their family.
4. Observe the interactions of all household members present in the home on the day of the visit and engage them in discussions, whenever possible. Inquire about those not present during the visit.
5. At least quarterly, conduct a walkthrough of the home to assess the home environment.
6. At least quarterly, engage all present adult household members and children (whether in foster care or not) in a discussion (either individually or in a group) of family functioning, roles and responsibilities of household members and the SSCM, any positive interactions over the past three months, any concerns anyone may have and any needs the family may have.
7. Document in Log of Contacts the observation and/or engagement of each family member during purposeful visits.

The DFCS Resource Development(RD) Case Manager whether dedicated or non-dedicated shall:

1. Maintain monthly contact, either face-to-face or by telephone, with both DFCS foster parents to conduct an ongoing assessment around the functioning, safety and well-being in the foster home including:
 - a. Any changes to the household composition since the last contact;

- b. The current placements in the home including child(ren)'s strengths, needs, permanency plans and any impact on the foster family;
 - c. Services being provided to the child(ren) in foster care or the family as a whole;
 - d. Frequency and quality of contacts by the child(ren)'s case manager;
 - e. Any needs of the foster parents including needed training, verifications, etc.
2. Conduct quarterly home visits in the DFCS foster home to include:
 - a. Separate quality time with each foster parent;
 - b. Separate quality time with each child in foster care;
 - c. Quality engagement with all other adult household members and children living in the home (either individually or in a group) to discuss family functioning, roles and responsibilities of household members and the SSCM, how fostering has impacted them as a family, their likes/dislikes and any needs they may have;
 - d. Observation of family interactions.
3. At every re-evaluation, allow for individual quality time with all adults and children (including children in foster care) living in the DFCS foster home.
4. Document in Log of Contacts the observation and/or engagement of each family member during foster home visits.

In order to ensure SSCMs and RD staff are conducting and documenting quality visits that engage the family as a whole, their respective Social Services Supervisor shall:

1. During monthly staffings, discuss the visits with the SSCM or RD staff to ensure that quality observation and engagement is occurring at each visit.
2. Review documentation in Log of Contacts to ensure that the documentation supports what occurred during visits.
3. Provide coaching to the SSCM or RD staff regarding conducting and documenting a quality visit, when the need is identified.

Questions should be directed to the Field Program Specialist in your region. Regional staff may direct questions to the Practice and Policy Unit at [PPPD Unit@dhr.state.ga.us](mailto:PPPDUnit@dhr.state.ga.us)