

## Preparation of the Child for Family Visits

Key Points to consider when preparing children for visits are:

- Children get preoccupied with details and self-interest. Be sure to inform them about things like: where and when they will eat lunch; whom they will see; and whether there will be toys to play with or other things to do.
- Use references in time that are meaningful to them: “You will be there on the day you don’t go to school,” or “You will be back in time to watch Sesame Street.”
- Work with caregiver to develop some special before-visit rituals to comfort the child such as arranging special clothing or fixing the child’s hair in a certain way.
- Address any concerns the child may have about personal safety: “I will be with you, or just in the next room, during the whole visit,” or “You can leave anytime you wish, here is the number to call.”
- Help children identify how they might feel once they are together with family members: “Some kids are nervous when they meet with their parents, other kids are excited, some are sad. How about you?” It’s important to note that many children may have difficulty identifying how they are feeling as well as communicating that verbally. One way to assist the child is to ask concrete questions that can help them cue into their internal state such as: “Can you feel your heart beating?” “If so, how fast is it going?” and “Let’s count the beats together and find out!” This can be done before the visit, on the way to the visit and after the visit. Talk with the child about things they can do to help with the nervousness or anxiety such as deep breathing exercises, rhythmic movement (i.e., swaying back and forth or rocking)
- Talk with the child about realistic expectations about the outcome of the visit, namely that the child will not be going home with the parents when the visit is over and validate the child’s feelings whatever they be (sadness, anger, frustration etc.) This can help with the transition from the visit back to the caregiver’s home.
- Elicit the child’s fantasy of what visiting with family will be like. Correct any misinformation: “Only Mom will come this time; Dad will be coming next time,” and respond to feelings.
- Use play, drawings, puppet shows and other forms of communicating with children.
- Children can be helped by being given permission to demonstrate to family members the way in which they have changed or grown during placement. This can ease a sense of divided loyalty between parents and foster parents. “Let’s be sure to talk with Mom about how well you can read now.”
- Make a game out of before-visit time. You might, for example, let the children “play the social worker” by having them ask questions and play that role.