

# 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.



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BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



# A Special Connection

**INTERVIEW WITH MARTY BEYER**

One of the most important things for a parent to do during visits is to try to imagine: What does my child want from me during our time together?

## CONFUSING BEHAVIORS

At times, it can be difficult to understand your child’s feelings and needs in visits.

Unfortunately, children usually can’t explain their feelings. A child won’t walk in and say, “I’m feeling really confused. I don’t know why I’m not living with you. Why am I living with someone else and visiting you in an office?” Most children behave their feelings and can’t explain them in words.

So the child might just walk over and start playing with a toy without saying hello. Many parents feel rejected if they don’t get a hug or hello. But parents can say to themselves, “I will go to my child and get on the floor and play even though my child hasn’t said hello.”

## A SPECIAL CONNECTION

It’s very sad for parents to think, “My child needs me to work hard to build our relationship while my child is in foster care.” But kids are sad, confused and angry about being in foster care. And even a few weeks or months is a long time for a child to be apart from a parent.

The most important thing during visits is to get a back-and-forth going with your children, whether that’s through singing a song, smiling at each other, playing a game, or talking about school. Taking pictures, doing art, and even painting fingernails can be a time to listen to your child talk about their lives and a way to make that special connection.

# Closer Than Ever

**BY SANDRA EVANS**

When I became a mom, I was afraid of making all the mistakes that my mother had made with me. Finally, I took a parenting class that showed me how to connect with my family in a different way.

The most valuable thing I learned was that I needed to set aside time to spend with my children to give them the attention they craved. I didn’t realize that children need attention in order to thrive.

I also learned that children feel safe when they have a daily schedule and when you’re consistent with them. I learned to hug and to hold my children more, tell them I love them, praise them when they do something good, and stick with a punishment once I set it.

In visits, I started to play with our kids, read to them, color and really enjoy our time. I wanted to hear about everything they had been doing. These were things I hadn’t done with my children before.

One day we went to the zoo. I’ll never forget the expressions on our children’s faces while they looked at the animals. It felt incredible that we could experience such joy as a family.

Now we do projects like baking or making our own Christmas ornaments. It helps to strengthen the bond between my children and me. We are closer than ever.

**WORDS THAT HEAL**

“I know this is really hard but we will get through this.”

“I know you might be mad at me but you still need to listen and follow rules.”

“I need to do some things before you can come home but none of this is your fault.”



Melissa Landrau and her daughter

# Starting Over

## After missing visits, I'm reconnecting with my kids

BY MELISSA LANDRAU

After my children went into foster care, my bond with my kids fell off because I failed to focus on them. I was depressed, felt betrayed by my family, and was in a domestic violence relationship. I fell off my visiting schedule for months at a time.

I was also telling myself that I'm not a worthy mother and I didn't deserve my kids, and that I'm just like my mom, who left me in the hospital at birth. My great grandmother raised me until she passed away and I fell in the system.

### STARTING OVER

Visiting my kids again steadily after missing visits for so long was emotional. My kids didn't recognize me. They were scared and pushed me away.

My daughter showed her feelings by getting fussy and aggravated really fast. When I would say, "I love you," my daughter said, "Mommy, I don't want you to love me." Because of what I went through as a kid, I understood it was because of the absences in her life. I let my kids know that I understood why they were mad.

I won her trust back by showing her change instead of telling her that I changed. I played with them in the playroom and I read to them and talked to them. With my actions, I showed that I missed my kids and I wanted them back.

### HAPPIER TOGETHER

The more I visited, the more I started telling myself, "You have to do what you are supposed to do and you can't give up. This is not a cycle. You're going to succeed."

Now my kids and I are in family therapy. The therapist taught me how important it is for my daughters to talk about their feelings. I'm proud of my daughters. We like to play house, blocks and Playdoh. We also like to read to each other and go for walks. They are able to express their feelings more and are happier and more energetic.

# Using Positive Discipline

Many times parents aren't sure if it's OK to discipline their children during visits. But you're still the parent, and your children want to see that you're in charge.

Kids feel safer and act calmer when they know the rules and consequences. Here's what you can do:

**1 Make sure you know the rules of your agency's visiting space.** Ask your caseworker if it's OK to play music, dance, sing, use your phone, eat, yell, give a time-out, run around. Talk to your kids about the agency's rules and your own.

**2 Give consistent consequences.** The first step if your child is breaking a rule is to make eye contact and simply say, "No. That is not allowed."

If your child does not stop, you can give a warning such as, "I will take away your toy if you don't stop." If needed, a parent can take away a toy for a few minutes, give a short time out, or end an activity.

You can say, "I want you to sit here and calm down until I say it's time to play again." Or, "This game isn't a good idea anymore. Let's have a snack, or read."

**3 If you break a rule, acknowledge it and apologize.** You can say, "I'm sorry I got upset and yelled." This can show your children how to handle their own mistakes.

**4 Praise your child.** In addition to consequences for negative behavior, you can reward good behavior, even just by saying, "That was nice" or "I like how you did that."



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## HANDLING PAINFUL FEELINGS IN VISITS

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

# Fight or Flight

## Coping when visits stir up reminders of trauma

Even though we love our children and want to see them, visiting children in foster care can bring up painful feelings for many parents. Sometimes visits are scary, stiff, weird, awkward, or sad. Our kids may act angry at us, or like they don't care. Walking into the agency can make us feel like a failure. If you were in foster care yourself as a child, visits can also bring up feelings of abandonment.

### WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is an experience that makes a person feel that her life is threatened—or a loved one's life is in danger—and overwhelms a person's ability to cope. It's normal in traumatic moments to freeze or feel unable to respond, to feel that you are apart from your own body, or to react with overwhelming fear, anger, or even violence.

The most devastating trauma occurs when people who are supposed to love us and keep us safe do us harm. Things like physical or sexual abuse or domestic violence, especially in close relationships, can make it hard for people to trust anyone. Trauma can also hurt how people feel about themselves, even though the abuse is not their fault.

### SIGNS OF STRESS RELATED TO TRAUMA

Trauma can affect us in so many ways, including how we respond to our children. There are some common reactions to trauma:

**Avoidance:** trying to avoid reminders of a trauma, like not going to a certain block, not seeing certain people, or not talking about it.

**"Hypervigilance":** staying "on alert" all of the time to try to stay safe, even if you're in danger.



**Overreacting:** reacting with anger, sadness, worry, or fear that is out of proportion to the situation.

**Under-reacting:** "just sitting there" emotionally or physically despite danger, such as showing no emotion after bad news.

**Changes in eating or sleeping:** too much or too little are both warning signs.

**Numbness:** feeling like you're not connected to yourself or not really there.

**"Losing time":** not being sure how you got from one place to another, or what happened to minutes or hours.

**Nightmares or bad memories** that seem to push in to your mind.

In visits, trauma can affect you and your child. You may feel jumpy or angry from the get go. You may sit there without playing, feeling emotionless or spaced out. You may forget what you were doing. These are signs of trauma.

### TIP

Feeling helpless and overwhelmed can be a "trauma trigger" if you've had trauma in your past. Trauma doesn't have to keep hurting. Knowing about trauma—and getting treatment—can help you cope.

### DID YOU KNOW

Therapy can feel unsafe if you start by opening up wounds. When you have gone through trauma, the first step in therapy should be how to calm down and feel safe and in control.

### TIP

Being aware of what trauma is can help you cope and ask for help. Ask for a trauma screening and trauma-focused treatment if you think trauma is affecting you.



Rise writer Jeanette Vega and her son Joey

# Putting the Past in the Past

BY LATOYA FITZGERALD

For months after my daughter was taken, I felt like I was stuck in the past and that I could not go on. I didn't even want to visit my daughter. I was too ashamed.

I also feared that my past would be an unbreakable cycle and I could never have a different future.

## A MOMENT OF TERROR

Once, as I was about to leave a visit, my daughter started crying and said, "Don't leave me, Mommy." Immediately, I was frozen. Everything seemed to stop moving. My mind was so far gone. It felt like an out-of-body experience. I was 5 years old again and crying for my mother not to leave me with her boyfriend, who sexually abused me, but she did. In that moment, I felt a fear deep within that felt like it would consume my soul.

Without really being aware of it, I grabbed my bag, took out a beer and drank it—right in our visit at the agency. (Stupid, huh?) At that moment, I couldn't think of any other way to hold it together.

## DREAMING AGAIN

Now I know that my reaction was related to trauma. That's called "dissociation" and comes from a reminder of a moment of terror in your past.

Parenting Journey, therapy and writing have helped me feel that the past and present are separate—and that I have control over my future.

Now my daughter and I have a stronger relationship. On visits, I bring arts and crafts and mostly home cooked meals. We talk about the day when she will come home and how she wants her room to be decorated. We are dreaming again. To me, talking about the future means we're not just existing anymore, we're living.

# Calming Your Body to Heal

Trauma is about feeling abandoned and scared, not having life feel safe or predictable, and not having a voice or control of even part of your life.

Trauma lives in our bodies. Our brains try to keep our bodies from feeling that trauma. But our bodies may continue to experience agitation, rage and heartache. Those are all pieces of the past that haven't been laid to rest.

## LEARNING AND HEALING

Therapy can be an important part of trauma recovery, because when you've experienced trauma you need to find words for what happened to you. A therapist should help you feel safe to feel what you feel and encourage you to really be curious about yourself.

Healing is also about learning how to calm your body down. People who have experienced trauma often barely notice their bodies because their brains are used to cutting off their feelings. They may overeat or starve themselves. They may not notice when they're tired. Trauma resets the brain and makes many things harder, like concentration and calming down reactions. But it is possible to heal.

## NOTICING HOW YOUR BODY FEELS

Ask yourself: What will help you begin to notice the sensations in your body? Anything you do is good. Just sitting quietly and paying attention to your breathing is a step in the right direction. Meditation, Tai Chi and yoga can help. A trauma-focused therapist can help you focus on the body.

Once you start paying attention to your body, it's easier in difficult moments to take steps to care for yourself instead of getting too angry, scared, or shut down.

*From an interview by Plazadora Footman with Bessel Van Der Kolk, author of The Body Keeps Score.*



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BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

# Visiting Do's & Don'ts

Below are general guidelines about visits. However, every case is different. Ask your caseworker and your attorney about your case.

## 1. VISITS WITH YOUR CHILDREN SHOULD:

- Start within a week of your child entering foster care
- Take place for at least 2 hours each week and more often for infants and toddlers
- Be unsupervised as much as possible

## 2. BEYOND VISITS, YOU CAN:

- Ask for contact by phone or email (If you have a positive relationship with the foster parent)
- Exchange photos and letters
- Participate in children's medical visits, school conferences and activities

## 3. VISITING TIME SHOULD INCREASE IF YOU'RE:

- Attending consistently and on time
- Paying attention to your child for the whole visit
- Showing progress on the goals in your case — not just attending programs, but showing behavior changes related to the safety concerns in your case
- Being nurturing and loving

## 4. YOUR CASEWORKER REPORTS TO THE COURT WHETHER YOU:

- Attended your visit
- Came on time

- Called in advance if you were going to be late or had to reschedule
- Gave your attention to your child the whole time
- Disciplined your child appropriately
- Kept anger and frustration out of time with your child

## 5. YOUR VISITS MAY BE SUPERVISED, OR BE SET BACK TO SUPERVISED, IF:

- There's a concern that your child will be unsafe with you
- You are not showing a change in being able to keep yourself and your child safe
- You are not taking steps to address mental health problems or addiction
- There's a concern you will run off with your child
- There's a concern that you will influence your child's testimony in court

## 6. IT'S RARE BUT YOUR VISITS MAY BE CANCELLED ON THE SPOT IF YOU:

- Are drunk or high
- Act aggressively or make threats
- Hit your child — including "popping" your child — or threaten your child
- Blame, shame, or threaten your child in any way, especially saying that it's your child's fault that you have a case
- Can't calm down even after a warning
- Arrive very late without calling

## How to Self-Advocate

1. Talk to your caseworker and lawyer about your visiting plan and ask for a copy of the court report.
2. Ask your caseworker to explain exactly what you need to do to make progress and ask for feedback after each visit.
3. Keep a "Visiting Notebook." Write down:
  - Whether you attended and if you were on time;
  - How the visit went;
  - If your visit was cancelled and why, and whether it was made up.
4. If your visit is cancelled, speak to your caseworker to reschedule. If your visits are not made up, show your Visiting Notebook to your caseworker's supervisor, a parent advocate and to your lawyer.





## Eat, Play, Love

After my daughter went into foster care at 18 months old, we had visits in an agency visiting room: no toys and very gloomy green paint on the walls.

Before each visit, I would pack a bag of toys, coloring books and reading books. I tried to be ready for any activity.

### A VISITING ROUTINE

My daughter would come wearing clothes that were too small, and her hair was never done properly. I would hug her and then take her to the bathroom to change her clothes and do her hair. It made me feel better that I was still able to take care of my daughter.

Then she would usually eat a Happy Meal, and for the rest of the visit, she and my husband and I would play. Her favorite thing to do was color. She also liked us to bring kitchen things, like plates and spoons and forks. We would pretend we were cooking.

Every visit, I took pictures to look at during my week.

When it was time to say goodbye, I tried not to cry because I did not want my daughter to see me hysterical. I would tell her, "I love you and I'll see you next week." Then we would say goodbye with a hug and a kiss.

### LAUGHING AND PLAYING

When the judge gave my family unsupervised visits, it was such a weight off. I was able to really hold my daughter and smother her with all of my love.

We were always there early to pick her up and on time to drop her off. We would take her to the park and the playground, and to see our friends.

I loved taking her to the swimming pool. I bought her a little sky blue one-piece bathing suit. Now that I was sober, I was able to laugh and play in the water with her without any shame. These were moments that I did not want to let go of.

## Visiting Checklist

### Did I...

- ✓ Attend my visit
- ✓ Arrive on time
- ✓ Plan activities
- ✓ Bring toys
- ✓ Bring a snack
- ✓ Greet my child's foster parent
- ✓ Keep anger/frustration out of my visit
- ✓ Focus only on my child

### Did I respond to my child's needs...

- ✓ for me to be trustworthy
- ✓ for affection and attention
- ✓ to follow a routine
- ✓ to have fun together
- ✓ to feel safe with the foster parent
- ✓ to talk about experiences in foster care
- ✓ to say goodbye in a positive way

### DID YOU KNOW

Parents are allowed to ask for visits to happen anywhere, like at a park or at the library. The caseworker may not be able to say yes every time but you can ask. A foster parent can also supervise visits outside the agency.

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