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|  VERMONT DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES Family Services Policy Manual | | <h1>124</h1> |
| Chapter: | Planning With Children and Families | |
| Subject: | Family Time | Page 1 of 4 |
| Approved: | Cynthia K. Walcott, Deputy Commissioner | Effective: 9/1/2009 FINAL |
| Supersedes: | Policy 124 Family Visiting | Dated: 10/16/1998 |

Purpose

To establish division policy on parental and family contact between children in care and people who are important in their lives and to provide general information on family time.

Safe and timely reunification is the first and primary goal for children in custody. Frequent, supported family contact is essential to maintaining attachments, thus reducing the child's sense of abandonment and contributing to successful reunification. Frequent and quality family contact has been found to be associated with family reunification and decreased length of stay in out of home placement.

Definitions

Family time is face to face parent-child, kin, sibling, and/or contact with others who are important in the life of the child.

The Shared Parenting Meeting is a time for the social worker, parents, foster parents, and sometimes the child/youth and other family members as appropriate, to sit down and develop the plan for family time. If a Family Time Coach is working with the parents, it is necessary for them to attend. This meeting is convened by the social worker with assistance from the coach if there is one.

The Family Time Plan is developed at the Shared Parenting Meeting and documents all decisions and addresses any safety concerns related to physical, sexual or emotional risks.

Family Time Coaching, developed by Marty Beyer, PhD is a primary intervention model for family time to facilitate reunification or other permanency planning. It provides parents with the opportunity to become more confident in recognizing and responding to their children's needs.

Supervised Visitation Programs exist throughout the state. They offer enhanced safety procedures for family time and when monitoring is necessary for when children arrive and leave the visit.

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Policy

The Division supports the use of Family Time Coaching as the primary method of maintaining, strengthening or developing relationships between children and their parents when it is necessary to build parental capacity to meet children's needs. When this is not the case, the social worker and the supervisor will explore the appropriateness of supporting family time without a Family Time Coach or a monitor.

It is important that social workers ensure that family time is a well planned activity that occurs as soon as possible when a child enters out of home care. This is important because a child that is removed from his/her home faces a new risk, the emotional and developmental harm that can result from separation. Maintaining and strengthening attachments are critical to a child separated from his/her family.

You may view Vermont Family Time Guidelines at: <http://intra.dcf.state.vt.us/fsd/practice>

Recommended Practice Timeframes

The initial family time should occur within 3 working days of the child's placement assuming that individual planning for special circumstances have been addressed if necessary.

The Shared Parenting Meeting should occur within 5 working days of the child's placement and a Family Time Plan should result from this meeting. A copy of the plan should be provided to all attendees and submitted to the court.

The social worker will attend one family time session per month when the family is supported by Family Time Coaching. Contact with family or other people important to the child will never be used as a reward or punishment.

The Family Time Plan should be reviewed and updated at least every three months.

Situations that Require Special Considerations

There are many family time circumstances that require individualized planning. The Vermont Family Time Guidelines outline special considerations in situations where families and social workers are confronted with the following:

- Involving absent parents/extended family

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- Domestic abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Incarcerated parents
- Parents in a treatment facility
- Safety concerns
- Termination of parental rights/goodbye contact

Social workers are expected to address these during the family time planning process.

In situations of extreme trauma resulting from experiencing abuse or violence, therapeutic contact between a child and an offending parent may be necessary. Please see Appendix A in the Vermont Family Time Guidelines for assistance.

Supervised Visitation Programs

Supervised Visitation Programs should be considered when ongoing safety or danger situations exist including:

- When there has been intimate partner violence and the perpetrator continues to pose a danger and/or risk to the caretaker and/or children.
- In sexual abuse cases where danger cannot be mitigated in other ways.
- When there are concerns regarding threats to DCF staff.
- Any situations that require observation at all times and/or require other safety mechanisms on site which are built into how these programs operate (i.e. separate entries, separate parking areas, delayed arrival times, etc. to assure parents/foster parents don't have contact with each other).

See Family Services Policy 123 Reviewing Case Plan Decisions for information about the appeal process regarding family contact.

District Director Tasks

- Ensure that Family Time Coaching activities are effective and appropriately supported through the Child and Family Supports contract.

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Social Worker Tasks

- Arrange for the initial family time to occur as soon as possible after a child is placed in out of home care.
- Convene a Shared Parenting Meeting as soon as possible after a child is placed in out of home care.
- Develop a Family Time Plan outlining aspects of family contact and submit to all parties including the Court.
- Attend one family time per month when family is supported by Family Time Coaching.
- Ensure the Family Time Plan is updated at least every 6 months.