

Family  
TIME



# A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents



OKLAHOMA  
Human Services

## Family Time: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents

When a child is removed from their parent's care and placed in foster care, it is critical that parent-child visits, also known as family time, occur. **Family time promotes timely reunification, and supports the parent-child relationship necessary for successful reunification. Family time also helps in the decision-making process to establish the best permanency plan for each child.** Foster parents are critical in maintaining connections between children and their family through family time. This is part of foster parents' important partnership with the biological child's parents and the children they care for and support.

No matter why children have been removed from their parent's care, both parents and children are likely to experience strong emotional reactions about the separation. While children may feel happy and excited about family time with their parents, children may also experience difficult emotions before, during or after family time. They may appear sad, disappointed, angry, withdrawn or anxious, or act like they don't care. It is not unusual to observe children crying excessively, whining, regressing to infantile behavior, having nightmares or sleep disturbances, wetting the bed, becoming aggressive, being unable to listen and/or complaining of physical pain before and/or after family time. Youth may also express difficult feelings before, during and after family time by appearing moody or avoidant, behaving disrespectfully or defiantly or engaging in risky or "rule-breaking" behaviors. These behaviors are often a result of trauma and although not ideal, can be an expression of how the youth is coping with the stress of loss and transition from family.

As a trusted caregiver, you are likely to encounter a child's difficult behaviors before or after family time visits. You may also need to help manage a child's strong emotions, as well as your own feelings, if a family time visit does not go well. Let's talk further about these behaviors and what the child might be experiencing.



## Preparing for Success

It is important to do what you can to prepare for successful family time with their parents. Proactively preparing for family time can make a big impact. Here are some suggestions:

### Assist the child in your care to be emotionally prepared for family time.

- Be intentional and provide additional emotional support to the child prior to family time.
- Openly talk and actively listen to the child's feelings about seeing their parents and/or siblings.
- Be mindful when talking about the child's parents and remain positive.
- Be open and honest about which known family members will and will not be attending family time; share with the child who else may be present during family time (i.e. you, caseworker, therapist, etc.)
- If the child is in mental health services, consider scheduling counseling appointments around family time to support the child's well-being.
- Reassure the child that you will welcome them when they return from family time and plan to spend a few extra minutes to help the child transition.
- Encourage the child to ask any questions regarding what family time will be like.



## Before Family Time Visits

Some feelings a child may potentially experience prior to family time include:

- Anxiety due to a disruption in the child's daily routine.
- Fear of an unfamiliar person transporting the child.
- Having unrealistic expectations or anxiety about how family time will go.
- Having an overwhelming desire to see their parents and/or siblings.
- Normal feelings of loss and separation that are increased by seeing their parent.
- Worry that being removed was their fault or being confused about why they cannot go home.
- Fear that going to a visit means they will not return to the foster/adoptive home.
- Reliving abuse and neglect trauma in anticipation of family time.
- Fear of separation from the foster/adoptive parent(s).
- Sensing the parent or foster/adoptive parent's anxiety or anger regarding family time.
- Feeling defensive if it seems their parents or foster/adoptive parents are being criticized.



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## Support family time with the child in your care in mind.

- Request a Family Time Plan if one has not already been provided.
- Work directly with the child's parents to plan and schedule visits, when possible.
- Advocate for family time to be scheduled consistently and with the child's schedule and routine in mind (i.e., not late at night, not during school hours or nap-time, etc.)
- Volunteer to provide transportation to family time, when possible, to provide reassurance and calming.
- Help the child plan a fun activity they might like to do with their parents during family time.
- Encourage family time to occur in a home-like setting, such as the parents' home or your home, instead of an agency office.
- Keep a visible calendar in your home with family time dates so the child can look at it at any time for appropriate expectations about upcoming visits.



## Help the child in your care prepare on the day of family time.

- Create your own rituals prior to family time to comfort the child, such as allowing the child to pick their own clothes or fixing their hair in a special way.
- Help the child decide on a calming and comforting object (e.g., special book, stuffed animal, blanket) to take with them.
- Ensure the child has eaten and send a healthy snack.
- Encourage the child to draw a picture or create a small gift to give their parents.
- Provide the parents with recent pictures of the child to include them and support your connection with them.
- Review the family time schedule, including times and transportation plans, for the day in an age-appropriate way to reduce any anxiety.

## Supporting Children after Family Time

It is important to take action after the child in your care has a family time visit to support their transition and feelings. Here are some suggestions:

### Assist the child in your care with a smooth transition back into their normal routine.

- Volunteer to provide transportation from family time, when possible. If that is not possible, suggest that the child be returned to the foster home or a private location for a safe space to process their feelings (not at school or child care).
- Welcome the child warmly upon return and reassure them that you are happy to see them.
- Create your own rituals after family time to re-integrate the child into their routine and smooth the transition (i.e. have a snack, read a book, work a puzzle).
- Give the child a task to assist with upon returning to your home so they can contribute and feel like they belong.
- Update the calendar in your home with the next planned family time date and verbalize this to the child for reassurance.
- Ask the child what activities they would like to do at the next family time visit to begin planning.



## After Family Time Visits

Some feelings a child may potentially experience after family time include:

- Child's expectation of seeing their family was not met.
- Lack of adequate attention given to the child due to chaos created by multiple siblings or family members present, or the parent's own mental health or substance abuse problems.
- Child's parents were unaffectionate, unwelcoming or displayed behaviors that the child perceived as rejection.
- Reliving abuse, neglect or trauma during family time.
- Reliving the trauma of removal from their parent or fear of not seeing their parent again.
- Sensing the parent or foster/adoptive parent's anxiety, anger or distress during family time.
- Confusion about the relationship between the child's parents and foster parents, such as undermining each other or having negative interactions.
- Feeling a need to reject the foster parents after family time in loyalty to their parents.
- Fear of an unfamiliar person transporting the child from family time.
- Normal feelings of sadness and loss when family time visits end.

## **Encourage the child in your care to openly share their feelings if and when they are ready.**

- Be intentional by providing affection, quality time and reassurance to the child; this is important after each family time visit but is critical when it does not go well.
- Ask the child how they felt family time went. If they are not ready to talk, give them space to process and decompress.
- Let the child talk without interruption about their feelings regarding family time and seeing their parents
- Explain your understanding of how difficult it is for the child to visit their family and then leave again.
- Encourage the child to ask any questions regarding family time and answer transparently when possible.
- If the child voices concerns, reassure the child and discuss with the Child Welfare (CW) specialist.
- Share with the CW specialist if the child is consistently upset or has severe behaviors regarding family time. Discuss what has or has not worked to help de-escalate their behavior and if therapeutic family time could benefit the child and parent. Professional mental health services may be needed for the child if they are not already in place.





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## Handle canceled family time visits delicately.

If family time is canceled or the family does not come, it may be hard for the child in your care and they will need additional support.

Here are some suggestions:

- Objectively share with the child that family time is canceled or the parents cannot come when you become aware without criticizing or blaming anyone involved.
- Immediately reassure the child that the visit was not canceled because of them, or anything they did or did not do.
- Offer the child an opportunity to make a phone or video call to their parent, when appropriate; the child may experience anxiety until making sure the parent is okay.
- Spend quality time with the child and do an activity together to foster connectedness.
- Give the child grace and patience if they are distressed or upset; they are possibly disappointed, sad or angry.
- Remind the child they are loved.



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While family time can be challenging for children at times, it is critical to keeping a child connected to their family. You play an important role in helping to ensure that family time can be a positive and encouraging experience for a child. If you have concerns about your child's family time, don't hesitate to reach out to your child's team for assistance or support.

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