

Child and Family Visitation:

A Practice Guide to Support Lasting Reunification and Preserving Family Connections for Children in Foster Care



Visitation *is essential for a child's well-being*

Visitation *is fundamental to permanency*

Visitation *is vital to a child maintaining family relationships and cultural connections*

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Visitation is essential for a child's well-being

The primary purpose of visitation is to maintain the parent-child attachment, reduce a child's sense of abandonment, and preserve their sense of belonging as part of a family and community. A child needs to see and have regular contact with their parent(s), as this relationship is the foundation of child development.

Visitation is fundamental to permanency

Visitation facilitates permanency planning, promotes timely reunification, and helps in the decision-making process to establish alternative permanency plans. Visitation maintains and supports the parent-child relationship necessary for successful reunification.

Visitation is vital to a child maintaining family relationships and cultural connections

Maintaining family connections has life-long significance for a child. Visitation maintains their relationships with siblings and others who have a significant role in a child's life. When a child loses family connections, they also lose family history, medical history and cultural information. Visitation is considered the heart of reunification, but even when reunification is not likely, parents, siblings and extended family continue to be important in children's lives.

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The benefits of visitation

Minnesota Statutes, section 260C.212, subdivision 4, (b), identifies that the county social service agency provide parent(s) with a notice about the benefits of the parent-child maintaining visitation according to the out-of-home placement plan. Research identifies the following as benefits of parent-child visitation:

- Supports parent-child attachment
- Eases the pain of separation for all
- Maintains and strengthens family relationships
- Reassures a child that their parent(s) is/are alright and helps them to eliminate self-blame for placement
- Supports the family in dealing with changing relationships
- Enhances parent motivation to change by providing reassurance that the parent-child relationship is important for a child's well-being
- Provides opportunities for parent(s) to learn and try new skills
- Supports a child's adjustment to the foster home
- Enables the parent(s) to be active and stay current with their child's development, educational and medical needs, church and community activities
- Provides opportunities for parent(s) to assess how their child is doing, and share information about how to meet their child's needs
- Assists in the assessment and decision-making process regarding parenting capacities and permanency goals
- Reduces the time in out-of-home care
- Increases the likelihood of reunification.

Research on parental visits with children in foster care reveals that foster children:

- Who were visited frequently (once a week or once every two weeks) exhibited fewer behavioral problems than children who were visited infrequently (once a month or less), or not at all. Overall, children who had frequent contact with their parent(s) showed less anxiety and depression than children whose parents' visits were either infrequent or nonexistent. (Cantos & Gries, 1997)
- Who saw their parent(s) less than once a month felt they suffered as a result of not maintaining contact with their birth parent(s). (Kufeldt & Armstrong, 1995)
- Who were visited frequently by their parent(s) were more likely to have higher well-being ratings, and adjusted better to placement, were more likely to be discharged from placement, and experienced shorter placements. (Hess, 2003)

Visitation and family contact should never be used as a reward or punishment, but should always be considered a right of families and children.



The absence of regular and frequent parent-child visitation or contact may have serious consequences for both a child and parent(s). Without visitation, the relationship can deteriorate, and both can become emotionally detached. Once this occurs, reunification becomes more difficult.

First visit and frequency of visitation

It is important for children, parents and siblings to have contact as soon as possible after placement, and continued as frequently as possible. Research suggests that the first visit should occur within 48 hours of placement. When a child is immediately removed from their parents' care, it may be difficult to arrange a visit within 48 hours, but remember that it is important for a child's well-being to have contact.

A primary purpose of visitation is to maintain and develop a child's attachment with their parent(s). Secure and stable attachments are the foundation of a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. Frequency of visitation between parent(s) and their child(ren) in foster care should correlate with the children's age and development, as well as be consistent with their permanency goal.



Very young children need physical contact to maintain attachment with parent(s) or other primary caretakers. Social workers need to identify a child's attachment figures and arrange for infants and toddlers to have the frequent and consistent physical contact to ensure the child's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. They need to know that their parent(s) care(s) for them. Children placed in care between the ages of 6 months to 3 years are particularly vulnerable to separation from their attachment figure(s).

Infants and toddlers benefit from daily visitation, at the very least every two or three days. (See page 9 for more information about planning visitation to meet the needs of infants and toddlers.)



School-age children need the availability of attachment figure(s) and are able to use language to help them cope with separation. Secure attachment relies on a child's trust that their parent(s) are available, responsive and protective caregivers. School-age children can use the phone, e-mail, and utilize other forms of contact to communicate with their parent(s). *This group benefits from face-to-face contact of two to three times a week.* (Kelly & Lamb, 2000)

Youth are more likely to feel resentful when visitation schedules are made for them, therefore, they need to be involved in the development of a visitation plan. This is an important coping strategy for them to maintain their school, social or community activities. They will resent visitation plans being made that conflict with their other activities without their knowledge. A primary developmental task of adolescence is becoming an individual, the



process of psychologically separating from family and finding their identity. Youth who have been removed from the parental home before they are emotionally prepared for separation complicates the developmental task. *The frequency of visitation should be individually assessed, but considering adolescent development, they should have regular visitation and contact with parent(s), siblings and other important family members.* (Charles & Nelson, 2000)

For youth aging out of foster care, increased visitation with their family is key to determining which family members will be a supportive resource to them when they leave care.



Siblings need to be placed together from the first placement, unless there is a well-founded reason why placement together is not possible. If siblings are not together at initial placement, the social worker must work to reunite the siblings as soon as possible. If siblings are separated in placement, the county social worker must ensure regular visitation is part of the visitation plan.

Supervision and location of visitation



Supervised visitation is utilized to ensure a child's physical and emotional safety during contact with a family member, and/or to strengthen the parent-child relationship and enhance parental skills. The necessity of supervised visitation is determined through a safety assessment that identifies concerns for a child if their parent(s) have unsupervised contact with their child. When the assessment of safety determines that supervised visitation is needed, the agency provides

that information to the court. The court determines reasonable rules for supervised and unsupervised visitation. [Minn. Statutes, sections 260C.178, subd. 3 and 260C.201, subd. 5]

The visitation plan is guided by thorough and ongoing assessments of the parents' ability to safely care for and interact with their child(ren). The plan may require parent(s) to meet certain conditions related to visits, such as modifying behaviors that contributed to a child's removal. It is appropriate to determine conditions to protect the safety and well-being of children. However, visits should not be used as punishment or reward. Increased or reduced visitation should be related to an assessment of safety, and not linked to other measurements. (Hess & Prosch, 1988)

Through assessments, social workers identify safety concerns that exist if a child is left unsupervised with their parent(s) or other relatives. The assessment would consider the following factors:

| | |
|--|---|
| Age of the child. | Is the child able to talk about the visit and state needs? |
| Safety and context of abuse or relationship dynamics, including: | <p>Is there concern that the parent(s) may be physically or emotionally abusive to a child during the visit?</p> <p>Is there concern that the parent(s) may behave in an inappropriate or unpredictable way?</p> <p>Is there potential for abduction of a child during the visit?</p> <p>Is a child visiting with a perpetrator or person of concern?</p> |
| Emotional reaction of the child: | <p>Is a child concerned or afraid of being alone with their parent(s)?</p> <p>Have the parent(s) been known to make unrealistic or inappropriate promises to a child that has negatively impacted them?</p> |
| Progress of parents who are learning new skills: | <p>Is supervised visitation a tool to model positive parenting behavior and document progress?</p> <p>Is supervised visitation a tool to facilitate interaction or mediate conflict between the parent(s) and child?</p> |

(Hess, 2003)

Research does not identify alcohol or drug usage as a sole reason to restrict visitation to a supervised setting.

Supervised visitation is used to ensure safety and to improve parent-child interactions. Attachment II provides descriptions of the levels of supervision. This attachment can help social workers clarify and communicate the structure of a supervised visitation plan. (Hess, 2003)

If an agency recommends to the court that visits be supervised, the visitation plan in the out-of-home placement plan will include a summary statement of the assessed safety reasons supervision is necessary. Plans for supervising visits should be individualized and document the association to safety factors and goals of the out-of-home placement plan. The social worker should meet with the parent(s) and the child/youth separately to provide a shared understanding about the reasons the visits are supervised, the conditions, and the arrangements of the visitation plan.

Seek ways to involve extended family, foster families, and community members to support visitation – social workers need their support to ensure that lack of time is not a barrier to parent-child and sibling visitation.

Engaging fathers in visitation

Fathers have a significant impact on the lives of their children, and should receive equal consideration and involvement in visitation planning. Once the agency identifies the father and determines his role in the family, consider the following practices to increase father's involvement in visitation:



- Make efforts to immediately identify and contact fathers when a child is placed.
- Discuss with both parents the importance of father's involvement in their child's life. This should be discussed with other members of the case (child, other relatives), even if the mother is resistant to paternal involvement.

- Make face-to-face contact with fathers to discuss visits, inquire of any difficulties or questions they may have, and support the fact that they are providing care and nurturance to their children. (Something they may be doing for the first time.)
- Engage fathers in development of the out-of-home placement plan and visitation.
- Keep fathers equally informed about their child's appointments and activities, which encourages them to be involved.
- Ensure that foster parents know about the father's involvement, and know what their role is in keeping the father involved in visitation and other activities.

Family visitation: who visits a child?

A comprehensive family assessment identifies individuals with whom a child has an established and significant relationship. These relationships are considered significant because their loss could cause substantial harm to a child; preserving them is in the best interest of a child. This can include parents, grandparents, siblings, other relatives or adults in a surrogate parenting role, including kin and former foster parents.



During foster care placement social workers should consider how family members can be involved with a child and parents to support and enhance the parent-child relationship, and to preserve a child's connections. Consider

how family members can be involved to increase the frequency of visitation, help with transportation, involve a child in cultural events or provide the foster parents with respite. Engaging the family's expertise in creation of a geno-gram or eco-map may be a helpful strategy to identify a child's significant relationships.

Visitation with infants and toddlers

A child's experiences and relationships during the first few years of life are critical to their future social, emotional and cognitive development. The effect of separation from parents on very young children disturbs attachment and may harm a young child. Children's reactions to and their ability to cope with separation from parent(s) depends upon their age, developmental state and level of attachment.



Frequent, meaningful visitation is vital for very young ages. Placement decisions need to consider proximity to the parent(s) to allow for frequent visitation without extensive travel time that will be very difficult for a young child. Relatives and unrelated foster parents

of infants and toddlers need to understand and acknowledge the importance of the parent-child attachment at the early stages of child development, and the important support foster parents can offer parent(s) to help strengthen the parent-child relationship.

Because child development at this stage depends on parent-child attachment, special attention should be given to the visitation plan to ensure that visitation activities promote attachment. Some parents may not know how to perform daily care giving routines, and may not understand the significant role that day-to-day care of a child has to their overall development.

When an infant or toddler is in foster care, the out-of-home placement plan and visitation plan should consider the importance of frequent, meaningful visitation, and develop a plan that involves the parent(s) in daily care, provides physical contact, and play activities to promote parent-child attachment. The out-of-home placement plan should consider the training and support the relative(s) or unrelated foster parent(s) will need to further understand the importance of this stage of development, the parent-child relationship, and the foster parents' role in supporting frequent, meaningful visitation.

Visitation plan

Social workers have the primary responsibility to ensure that the visitation plan is developed, implemented and revised as needed. A fixed visitation schedule is best practice and has been related to more frequent visitation and fewer missed visits.

Visitation is a purposeful, planned activity that will have a positive effect on a child's need for safety, well-being and permanency.

The visitation plan:

- Honors a child's existing bonds and attachments
- Includes father and mother, siblings, and other relatives or kin who are significant to a child
- Promotes the family's individual strengths
- Provides continuity of family relationships
- Involves the parent(s), child, and foster family in the development and ongoing assessment of the plan
- Involves the family's support system
- Arranges visitation in the most home-like setting that will maintain a child's safety and existing attachments
- Connects a child's safety to the level of supervision
- Considers a child's daily schedule, and the parent(s)' work and/or treatment obligations
- Ensures that visitation frequency and settings are consistent, and develop progressively towards a permanency goal
- Respects the family's culture, faith and rituals
- Ensures that parent(s) assist in daily decision making, and participate in everyday activities as much as possible

- Increases contact and parents' role toward reunification, or when a child cannot return to parents' care, continues family relationships that preserves family and community connections.

Face-to-face visitation is preferred and important for children of any age. A visitation plan may consider a variety of additional forms of contact between family members, including phone calls; e-mails; instant messaging (IM); text messages; exchanging photographs, letters or cards; and attending school conferences, medical appointments, child's activities or community resources or events.

Minnesota policy requires parental and sibling visits be considered as part of the emergency removal hearing that occurs within 72 hours of an involuntary placement. [Minn. Stat., section 260C.178, subds. 1 and 3]

The visitation plan is to include visitation with parents, (guardian), siblings separated in placement and other relatives. Relatives are defined as persons who are related to a child by blood, marriage, adoption, or individuals who are an important friend with whom a child has resided or had significant contact. For Indian children, relatives include extended family defined by a child's tribal customs or laws. [Minn. Stat., section 260C.007, subd. 27]

Visitation must be consistent with the best interest of a child while they are in foster care. [Minn. Stat. 260C.212, subd. 1(c) (5)]

The court establishes reasonable rules for supervised and unsupervised visitation and contributes to the goals of the court order, as well as maintains family relationships. No parent may be denied visitation unless the court finds that visitation would prevent meeting court-ordered goals, or physically or emotionally endanger a child. [Minn. Stat., section 260C.201, subd. 5]

Visits should always begin before the out-of-home placement plan is written. The placement plan needs to be completed within 30 days of placement. A separate plan is required for each child in care, and includes a written visitation plan. The plan is developed jointly by the social worker and the parent(s), in consultation with a child's guardian ad litem; foster parents or representative of a residential facility; tribe, if an Indian child; and child. [Minn. Stat., section 260C.178, subd. 7, and 260C.212, subd. 1] The content of the visitation plan includes:

- Persons who can visit a child or who can be present during visits, such as parents, siblings, grandparents, other relatives/kin
- Frequency of visitation
- Arrangements for monitoring or supervision of visits
- Locations of visits
- Transportation arrangements
- Date the plan will be reviewed.

*Find ways to have natural
parent-child interaction.*

Minnesota's out-of-home placement plan includes an area to document "Other considerations about visitation." A thorough visitation plan would include the following in this section:

- Connecting plan goals and purpose of visitation to the child's safety in language parent(s) can understand. (Example, "Child may be emotionally harmed if unable to see or talk to their parent(s)," or "Family visits are a time for parent(s) and siblings to stay connected and play together without hurting each other.")

- Itemizing the dates, visit length, start and end times of visits
- Identifying who is responsible for arranging the visits, if specific times are not set, including who will initiate the call for visits
- Setting up exceptions for the visit, the level of supervision, identifying the monitor(s), and the role of the monitor
- Approving visit activities, including specific tasks for the parent(s), and who will bring necessary items, such as diapers, food, toys or activities
- Identifying behaviors that will end the visit and reasons why these behaviors are considered a safety factor, including visit conditions, such as:
 - Specifying physical and verbal boundaries
 - Exchanging of information such as notes, documents, gifts or toys
 - Calling in advance to confirm intention to miss a visit
 - Remaining sober throughout the visit
 - Refraining from using physical discipline
 - Refraining from bringing other persons to the visit without advance agency approval.
- Listing agency services to support visitation
- Planning to manage likely problems with visitation
- Outlining procedures for canceling a visit
- Planning for handling emergency situations, and a list of persons prohibited from visiting
- Planning for other forms of contact between family members, including:
 - Outlining the conditions for phone calls, letters, e-mails
 - Exchanging photographs, videos
 - Assessing the need to monitor the method or content of contacts.
- Describing methods to address sibling interactions when parent(s) are visiting.

Example of visitation plan

In this example, Family Group Decision Making was used to develop the plan. Susie is placed with her grandmother. Grandmother, Uncle Bill and the social worker have agreed to work in partnership to support the parents.



The permanency goal is to return Susie to her parents' home and care. The purpose of visitation is to keep Susie attached to her mother and father while she is in foster care prior to reunification.

Grandmother will drive Susie to her parents' home to visit on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 4:00 p.m. and pick her up at 5:30 p.m. Grandmother will bring diapers and a change of clothes.

When mother and father are not able to parent due to the obvious use of alcohol or drugs, or have visitors in their home, it is not safe for Susie to visit without supervision. When grandmother drops Susie off, she will go into the apartment. Grandmother will leave Susie in parents' care if they are prepared for a visit. They are not ready for a visit with Susie if there is a visitor in the apartment, or they are too high or drunk to care for her. If the parents are not ready for a visit, grandmother will not leave Susie alone; she will stay with Susie, but the visit will be shortened to 30 minutes or less. If grandmother ends the visit for any reason, she will call the social worker at her office phone number (651-222-xxxx). The social worker will call the grandmother back the next business day to talk about the visit. The social worker agrees to meet with mom and dad after any visit is ended early.

Jack Smith, in-home therapist, will participate and monitor the visits on Wednesdays.

Susie and her mom will attend the mom and baby swim class on Tuesday mornings at the community center. Uncle Bill will drive Susie to the class, meet mom in the lobby and return her to grandmother's care.

Mom and dad will not spank or hit Susie during a visit. Grandmother will help parents learn how to play with their child, redirect Susie's attention, and use time outs when needed. Parents' will show grandmother new information they are learning from their meetings with the parenting coach. They will offer Susie dinner.

If grandmother believes at any time that it is not safe for Susie to be in her parents' care, she should leave the apartment with Susie.

Mom, dad, grandmother, Uncle Bill, and the social worker developed this plan for visitation. If grandmother needs help with any part of this plan, she will call Uncle Bill and the social worker or agency. The after hours, help line is (651)222-xxxx.

If a visit needs to be canceled, the person canceling will notify the parents and the social worker by phone. Grandmother agrees to call the social worker immediately to report that a visit was ended or canceled due to safety concerns.

When Susie needs to see the doctor for routine care, mom and dad are responsible to make the appointment, and notify grandmother and agency. If an immediate appointment is needed, grandmother will make the appointment and notify parents and agency. Grandmother or Uncle Bill will drive Susie to the doctor and meet parents in the lobby. If parents need a ride, they agree to call grandmother or Uncle Bill.

The social worker will review the plan with mom, dad and grandmother once a week either by phone or during a face-to-face visit.

Support positive parent-child interactions – consider how visitation can be used to support learning new skills and building healthy attachments with their children.

The visitation schedule is developed *with* the parent(s), foster parent(s), child (if appropriate) and social worker. Examples of emerging practice that promotes involvement to develop a plan for visitation include:

- Visitation is an opportunity for parent(s) and foster parent(s) to meet, ask questions, share information about a child, and schedule visits. Agencies typically organize this meeting within three to seven days of placement. This meeting promotes communication about the child's well-being and initiates a relationship between the parent(s) and foster parent(s) to support a child's safety, permanency and well-being outcomes. It is vital that they meet right away if a child is under age 6, or before visitation takes place in the foster parents' home.
- Family Group Decision-Making conferences bring together family members and their support system, as well as relevant service providers, to share information and resources available for the family to develop a visitation plan. Family case-planning conferences can be utilized quickly to facilitate discussion about the case plan and decide next steps. The family is a child's enduring source of relationships, and the preservation of safe connections and attachments is paramount to their development.

Achieving safety, permanency and well-being outcomes requires social workers to understand the importance of visitation and commit to the process. A written plan reassures a child and their parent(s) that the agency is invested in maintaining family relationships. *Research indicates a strong relationship between the development of a visitation plan and actual visitation by parents.* Social workers' attitudes and behaviors that encourage visitation have a positive influence on parental visitation. (Center for Advanced Studies on Child Welfare, 1997)

Parent(s) may miss visits without providing notice, make unrealistic promises, or exhibit destructive behaviors during the visit. If this happens, the following should be considered:

- A parents' absence from a scheduled visit will be less disruptive to a child if the visit can be planned within the normal daily activities in the foster home, or another familiar setting

- Visits can be held in the home of a relative, where a child can visit with extended family or friends, even if the parent(s) do not attend
- Regular conferences between the parent(s), foster parent(s), social worker, and other appropriate persons can address visitation plans and frequent absence issues.

Review and revision of visitation plan

The out-of-home placement plan, which includes the visitation plan, must be reviewed and modified anytime a child's placement changes, and every six months until they return home, or an alternative permanency plan is finalized. The review is accomplished in an administrative review meeting or in a court review hearing. The out-of-home placement plan should be revised to reflect progress, needed changes and updates. Agency supervisors should consult with social worker to determine when a plan should be revised and signed.

Phases of visitation

It is important for social workers to view visitation as a process. There are essentially three phases of visiting: initial phase, middle phase and transition phase. Different purposes are emphasized in each phase, but the primary purpose in all phases is to preserve and enhance family connections. The three phases can be used as a guideline to assess and develop visitation plans. (Haight, 2001) The three phases of visitation are provided in Attachment III of this guide.

Terminating or limiting visitation

The absence of regular, frequent visitation may have serious consequences for children and parent(s). Changes in visitation should be directly related to ongoing safety concerns within a continuous assessment process. When visitation is viewed as directly related to assessment, visitation arrangements can be developed openly and as part of the out-of-home placement plan with continuing family participation.

No parent may be denied visitation unless the court finds that visitation would prevent achievement of placement outcomes or that it would endanger the child's physical or emotional well-being. [Minn. Stat., 260C.201, subd. 5]

Foster parents' role in visitation

Foster parents are essential partners to maintaining connections between children and people who are important to them. The following are responsibilities relatives and unrelated foster parents agree to accept upon licensure and relicensure:

- No withholding of basic needs, including but not limited to family visits, or no restrictions on a child's communication beyond the restrictions specified in the treatment or case plan, unless the restriction is approved by the case manager. [Minn. Rules, parts 2960.3080, subparts 8 (A) (4) and (7)]
- Follow the visitation and communication plan in the out-of-home placement plan as developed by the county and child's parent(s), or as required by court order. In the absence of a case plan regarding visitation, the license holder must work with the placing agency and the child's parent(s) to jointly develop a visitation plan. [Minn. Rules, part 2960.3080, subpart 9]
- Respect the importance of family to a child and make every effort to keep this relationship alive. Respect the importance of the out-of-home placement plan and comply with all requirements. A foster family must be willing to make adjustments to accommodate visitation. Acknowledge the effect of separation on a child, and the difficulties of adjusting to a new environment.*
- Make every effort to understand and be patient in addressing challenging behaviors that result from separation and grieving.*
- Maintain continuous contact with the supervising agency regarding matters significant to the adjustment and welfare of a child, including reporting behaviors, problematic or otherwise, that would help agency staff to understand their current emotional and behavioral state.*
- Keep information about a child and their family confidential and discuss only with appropriate agency staff member and other professionals designated by the agency.*
- Ensure that social worker and child have opportunities to meet alone.* **DHS form 139, 2006*

Additional best practice recommendations for foster parents include:

- Be actively involved in visits, model healthy parent-child interaction, teach parenting skills, or share information agreed to in the out-of-home placement plan.
- Provide emotional support, even when contact with parent(s) and siblings is disruptive or confusing to a child.
- Document a child's behavior after visits as requested by the social worker or as preferred by the foster parents.
- Have children ready for each contact, including having clothes packed, or support the visit with necessary supplies, such as diapers or special food.
- Consider ways to prepare a child for visits, and share information about their daily life, such as sending recent information from the school, school projects, or pictures of their child doing a chore.
- Ensure that parent(s) are aware of their child's activities and school events. Promote inclusion of the child's activities as part of the visitation plan. When a parent cannot attend activities, provide pictures.
- Provide transportation as agreed to in the out-of-home placement plan.
- Comfort and reassure a child in ways that are helpful following a visit, such as encouraging them to be open about expressing their feelings.
- Be flexible in scheduling visitation so that a child is able to have the maximum amount of contact. When face-to-face visits are not possible, plan with the social worker how to accommodate with telephone calls, contact by Web camera via internet, e-mail, or other options so parent(s) and children can maintain frequent contact.



- Notify the social worker of any unplanned contact between a child and parent(s) or between foster parent(s) and parent(s).
 - Talk positively about parent(s) to a child and to others.
 - Discuss reactions to visiting arrangements with the social worker, not the child or parent(s).
-
- Ensure that children have pictures of their parent(s), siblings and other important people, and a way to display them. If a child does not have pictures, ask the parent(s) or social worker for them.
 - Be curious about a child's cultural and family practices, as this information can be helpful to support visitation, such as knowing that the mother and the children enjoy card games, or their favorite cookie is oatmeal/raisin, that they celebrate Kwanza, they make egg rolls together, regularly attend local baseball games, or pick strawberries in the spring. Every family has their own practices that are often connected to their culture and family history. Obtaining this information can be significant to promoting frequent visitation, supporting reunification, and preserving a child's cultural and community connections.

Relative foster parents had a previous relationship with the child and parent(s), and their visitation role may need additional supports and considerations. Relative and kinship caregivers may be especially challenged when a child is upset or acts out after visits. They may also need extra support from social workers or other family members in understanding the challenges of loyalty issues, the importance of the visitation plan, and maintaining appropriate boundaries. The social workers' role as a liaison between the relative/kinship caregiver and parent(s) is key in promoting communication and encouraging understanding between parties, and preserving placement stability.

Understanding reactions and supporting visitation with the child, parent(s) and foster parent(s)

Child



Some children will feel happy and excited about visits with their parent(s), but for children of any age, there may be times when they become upset either prior, during, or after a visit. This **may** be due to:

- Normal feelings of loss and separation reactivated by seeing the parent(s) which can have an effect on the child's mood, ability to cope, and their behavior.
- Being anxious and fearful when visiting with their parent(s); their time together may be very stressful.
- Children experiencing a conflict in loyalty and feeling a need to reject the foster parent(s) when returning to the foster home to affirm their love for their parent(s).
- Feeling a loss or lack of control.
- A child thinking that it is their fault they cannot go home.
- Being confused about why they cannot go home.
- Not being able to talk about confusion or fears.
- A child being defensive when feeling that their parent(s) are being criticized.
- Regressing to babyish behavior, whining, having nightmares, wetting the bed, becoming aggressive, and being unable to listen, and/or complain of physical pain before and/or after visits.

When visitation is consistently causing a child distress, the social worker would assess their needs in an individual conversation, (if they are verbal) and discuss with parent(s) and foster parents. The following would be considered:

If a child becomes upset due to feelings of separation or loss, the social worker could consider increasing the frequency and duration of visits.

If a child is anxious because they are not comfortable with their parent(s), the social worker could consider increasing contact; perhaps the location could be a place that is safe or fun; or consider including someone to be with the child whom they identify with as a supportive person to ease their concern.

If a child's behavior appears to be related to attachment issues, the social worker could consider involving a parent coach or therapist to assist parent(s) in improving the parent-child relationship.



If loyalty conflicts contribute to a child's distress, the social worker could reassure them that it is okay to like or care for both their family and their foster family. The social worker should request that the foster family and parent(s) help to reassure the child.

If a child appears to be fearful or reserved, or too quiet during a visit, the worker should consider encouraging them to talk about their concerns, reassure them that the worker will

support them, and develop a plan to support their emotional needs during and after visits.

Parent(s)

No matter why a child is in placement, parent(s) may feel pain, anger and fear of losing custody of their child. Parents may show these feelings by:

- Trying to cope by engaging in visitation activities that show affection and concern for their children.
- Competing for their children's loyalty by making unrealistic promises, or undermining the foster parents.

- Reacting to lack of control by requiring certain locations or activities.
- Becoming anxious about visits and overcompensate by bringing numerous gifts, or making numerous calls to the foster parents.
- Using alcohol or drugs before a visit.
- Canceling or not showing up for visits.

When parent(s) are absent from visits or behaving in a manner that is disruptive or causes a child distress, the social worker would assess parent(s)' individual needs. The following would be considered:

If parent(s) engage in competitive behavior for a child's loyalty, the social worker should promote the parent-child relationship to ensure that the parent(s) are involved in their child's daily care and decision making. The social worker could consider a plan for regular communication between the foster parents and parent(s) to ensure that they are consistently involved in their child's care.

If parent(s) use alcohol or drugs before a visit, the social worker should consider involving, or increasing the involvement, of the Alcohol or Other Drug (AOD) treatment or aftercare professionals to support visitation.

If parent(s) is/are anxious, they may not know what is expected at visits or how to interact with their child. The social worker could consider meeting with parent(s) before visits to help plan and coach them through the expectations of the visit. Parent(s) may also need additional services to assist them in learning new skills.

If parent(s) is/are absent from visits the social worker may consider additional assessments to determine the parents' needs and how to support their individual strengths.

Foster Parents

No matter why children have been removed from their parents' care and placed in foster care, parents and children are going to have feelings and emotional reactions about the separation. Foster parents enter into a relationship with the parent(s) and the children, and will need assistance to understand and evaluate their role in visitation. Assessments include:

- Do foster parents acknowledge the importance of the parent-child relationship, and are they pleased when a child is comforted by visits with parent(s) and family members?
- Are foster parents able to see that foster care is temporary and facilitates reunification, while understanding a child's need for permanency?
- Do foster parents understand separation/grief and resist blaming parent(s) for a child's emotional or behavioral reactions?
- Are foster parents resentful of disruptions that visitation causes in the family routine and having to deal with a child's reactions?
- Do foster parents express concern that a child does not have time to become a member of their family?
- Do foster parents make efforts to engage parent(s) in the day-to-day care of their child?
- Do foster parents ensure that parent(s) are aware of the child's school or other activities as directed by the out-of-home placement plan?

When the foster parents' reactions to visitation are not supporting permanency goals, the social worker would assess their needs. The following would be considered:

If foster parents express a different understanding of their role, or lack of knowledge about separation, loss or attachment issues, the social worker could ensure that they receive training to address this need. The social worker could also consider facilitating meetings between foster parents and parent(s) to assist in relationship-building.

If foster parents are resentful of disruptions visitation causes in their family life, or a child's reactions, the social worker should consider further assessment to understand the child and family's daily schedule and child's reactions. The child may need additional supports to cope with visitation, or the foster parents may need additional support.

If foster parents express concern that a child is not attaching to their family, the social worker should consider the following as it relates to the placement:

- The permanency goal
- The use of concurrent planning
- The role of the foster family
- The length of placement.

Consider for length of placement: For new placements, foster parents may need training about separation and the importance of visitation for a child's well-being. **If a child has been with the foster family for several months** and parent(s) are not making progress towards reunification, the foster parents may start to connect to the child and feel the need to provide stability and permanency. If this is the case, services and supports available to concurrent resource families should be considered.

If the foster family is not making efforts to engage parent(s) in daily care or well-being appointments, the worker should consider whether foster parents are aware of their role, and clarify their role in writing as part of the out-of-home placement plan.

If foster parents are relatives, the worker needs to consider the family relationships, and make efforts to promote stability and support for the family within the family system. The worker should also consider formal system supports to ensure that the relative foster family is receiving training and services typically made available to unrelated foster parents.

Visits with an incarcerated parent

When a child's parent(s) is/are incarcerated, special arrangements will be necessary to support visitation. If the parents' incarceration was related to abusing a child, the impact of contact with the parent(s) on the child will need to be assessed. A therapist's assessment and recommendations should be considered before implementation of the visitation plan.

If the permanency goal is reunification, every effort should be made to assure regular visitation. A child's fantasy about prison life and the parents' experiences may be more frightening than reality. A visit can reassure a child that their parent(s) are okay.

Visitation planning will include contacting the prison to understand the visitation procedures and arrangements. A child should be prepared about the contact they will have with their parent in prison. Consider how information about the facility can be shared with the child. A child should know if they will see their parent in a small room, or if the visit will be in a large room with other prisoners and families, and if they will be able to hug their parent. A child should also know the facilities' rules about gifts or mail.

(Hess & Proch, 1988)

The Minnesota Department of Corrections has information on their Web site about facilities, including virtual tours of living units and visiting rooms at www.corr.state.mn.us. Information about federal prisons is found at www.bop.gov.

Visitation considerations in cases of domestic or sexual abuse

When children are placed from homes where domestic violence has occurred, the impact of family violence and other forms of abuse will require an assessment of the situation to consider a child's experiences, and the impact on them. A child's experiences could differ significantly from an adult's experiences. The assessment of the situation would determine safety issues, and any measures needed to arrange for safe visits that will address a child's needs. This could include considerations for drop-off and pick-up locations, as well as a safety plan.

In sexual abuse cases, social workers need to assess safety issues, as well as a child and parent(s) readiness for visitation, including therapist recommendations and evaluations as part of the assessment. The court may also set rules and boundaries about contact.

Visits with children in group care/residential facilities

Residential facilities do not develop visitation plans; the responsible social service agency is required to develop an individual visitation plan that is consistent with the goals of placement and maintains the child-family relationships. Residential facilities' licensing rules require them to work with agencies to develop individual visitation plans for children. Minn. Rules require:

- A child in a residential facility has the reasonable right to communication and visitation with adults outside the facility, which may include parent(s), extended family members, siblings, legal guardian(s), social worker, attorney, therapist, physician, religious advisor, and case manager in accordance with the resident's case plan. [Minn. Rule 2960.0050, subpart 1, J]
- A licensed facility must not subject residents to withholding of basic needs, including, but not limited to: a nutritious diet, drinking water, clothing, hygiene facilities, normal sleeping conditions, proper lighting, educational services, exercise activities, ventilation and proper temperature, mail, family visits, positive reinforcement, nurturing or medical care. [Minn. Rule 2960.0080, subpart 5, A, (4)]

A licensed facility may not restrict the visiting rights of parent(s) of a resident beyond the limitations placed on those rights by a court order under Minn. Statutes, section 260C.201, subd. 5 or limitations in the resident's out-of-home placement plan. Visiting policies must allow parental visits at times that accommodate the parents' schedule. [Minn. Rule 2960.0080, subpart 15, B]

Visits between child and siblings

Minnesota law and best practice requires that full, half or stepsiblings be placed together in foster and adoptive homes. [Minn. Stats., sections 260C.193, subd. 3 and 260C.212, subd. 2] When this is not possible, it is the social service agency's responsibility to develop a plan for regular and ongoing sibling visits. Siblings can visit in conjunction with parental visitation. However, if parental visits are suspended or terminated, this does not end regular sibling visitation.



A sibling visitation plan is to be included in the out-of-home placement plan. Visitation that is contingent on a child's behavior is not consistent with the outcome of preserving family relationships. A team should assess the behavior prior to changing the visitation plan.

Relatives, even if they have not been able to be a placement resource, can be an important partner in developing and implementing a sibling visitation plan. Relatives can assist with visitation, including supervising visits, driving children to visits, or helping them to attend family functions or celebrations. Other strategies would include:

- Educating foster and adoptive parents on the importance of sibling relationships and how to actively facilitate a sibling relationship by helping to maintain contact
- Scheduling joint therapy sessions
- Sharing vacations
- Sharing child care providers or babysitters
- Taking regular sibling group pictures
- Doing life books together
- Acknowledging and celebrating each siblings birthday.

Final thoughts.....

Visits can be complex. Everyone involved in the visit has different goals, agendas, expectations and needs. Social workers must understand and manage each of these while keeping the focus on the children and their permanency.

Attachment I:

Minnesota statutes about foster care and family visitation:

Section 260C.178 EMERGENCY REMOVAL HEARING.

Subdivision 1. Hearing and release requirements. k) If a child ordered into foster care has siblings, whether full, half, or step, who are also ordered into foster care, the court shall inquire of the responsible social services agency of the efforts to place the children together as required by section 260C.212, subdivision 2, paragraph (d), if placement together is in each child's best interests, unless a child is in placement due solely to the child's own behavior or a child is placed with a previously noncustodial parent who is not parent to all siblings. If the children are not placed together at the time of the hearing, the court shall inquire at each subsequent hearing of the agency's efforts to place the siblings together. If any sibling is not placed with another sibling or siblings, the agency must develop a plan for visitation among the siblings as required under section 260C.212, subdivision 1.

Subd. 3. Parental visitation. If a child has been taken into custody under section 260C.151, subdivision 5, or 260C.175, subdivision 1, clause (b)(ii), and the court determines that the child should continue in foster care, the court shall include in its order reasonable rules for supervised or unsupervised parental visitation of the child in the foster care facility unless it finds that visitation would endanger the child's physical or emotional well-being.

Section 260C.193 DISPOSITIONS; GENERAL PROVISIONS

Subdivision 3. Best interest of the child in foster care or residential care. e) Whenever possible, siblings should be placed together unless it is determined not to be in the best interests of a sibling. If siblings are not placed together according to section 260C.212, subdivision 2, paragraph (d), the responsible social services agency shall report to the court the efforts made to place the siblings together and why the efforts were not successful. If the court is not satisfied with the agency's efforts to place siblings together, the court may order the agency to make further efforts. If siblings are not placed together the court shall review the responsible social services agency's plan for visitation among siblings required as part of the out-of-home placement plan under section 260C.212.

Section 260C.201 DISPOSITIONS; CHILDREN WHO ARE IN NEED OF PROTECTION OR SERVICES OR NEGLECTED AND IN FOSTER CARE.

Subdivision 3. Domestic child abuse. a) If the court finds that the child is a victim of domestic child abuse, as defined in section 260C.007, subdivision 28, it may order any of the following dispositions of the case in addition to or as alternatives to the dispositions authorized under subdivision 1: (3) on the same basis as is provided in chapter 518, establish temporary visitation with regard to minor children of the adult family or household members

Subd. 5. Visitation. If the court orders that the child be placed outside of the child's home or present residence, it shall set reasonable rules for supervised or unsupervised parental visitation that contribute to the objectives of the court order and the maintenance of the familial relationship. No parent may be denied visitation unless the court finds at the disposition hearing that the visitation would act to prevent the achievement of the order's objectives or that it would endanger the child's physical or emotional well-being. The court shall set reasonable rules for visitation for any relatives as defined in section 260C.007, subdivision 27, and with siblings of the child, if visitation is consistent with the best interests of the child

Subd. 11a. Permanency review for children under eight. c) (2) If the court determines that the parent or guardian is not complying with the out-of-home placement plan or is not maintaining regular contact with the child as outlined in the visitation plan required as part of the out-of-home placement plan under section 260C.212, the court may order the responsible social services agency to develop a plan for permanent placement of the child away from the parent and to file a petition to support an order for the permanent placement plan.

Section 260C.212 CHILDREN IN PLACEMENT

Subdivision 1. Out-of-home placement; plan c) The out-of-home placement plan shall be explained to all persons involved in its implementation, including the child who has signed the plan, and shall set forth: (5) the visitation plan for the parent or parents or guardian, other relatives as defined in section 260C.007, subdivision 27, and siblings of the child if the siblings are not placed together in the residential facility, and whether visitation is consistent with the best interest of the child, during the period the child is in foster care;

Subd. 2. Placement decisions based on best interest of the child.

(d) Siblings should be placed together for foster care and adoption at the earliest possible time unless it is determined not to be in the best interests of a sibling or unless it is not possible after appropriate efforts by the responsible social services agency.

Subd. 4. Responsible social service agency's duties for children in placement.

(b) The responsible social services agency shall give notice to the parent or parents or guardian of each child in foster care, other than a child in voluntary foster care for treatment under Chapter 260D, of the following information:

(7) when safe for the child, the benefits to the child and the parent of maintaining visitation with the child as soon as possible in the course of the case and, in any event, according to the visitation plan under this section.

Subd. 5. Relative search; nature. d) Unless required under the Indian Child Welfare Act or relieved of this duty by the court under paragraph (c), when the agency determines that it is necessary to prepare for the permanent placement determination hearing, or in anticipation of filing a termination of parental rights petition, the agency shall send notice to the relatives, any adult with whom the child is currently residing, any adult with whom the child has resided for one year or longer in the past, and any adults who have maintained a relationship or exercised visitation with the child as identified in the agency case plan. The notice must state that a permanent home is sought for the child and that the individuals receiving the notice may indicate to the agency their interest in providing a permanent home. The notice must state that within 30 days of receipt of the notice an individual receiving the notice must indicate to the agency the individual's interest in providing a permanent home for the child or that the individual may lose the opportunity to be considered for a permanent placement.

Attachment II:

Supervision level

| Supervision level | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| Unsupervised | Relaxed and/or intermittent supervision, (including overnights) | Moderate/structured supervision | Highly structured/strict supervision |
| No monitor is present for the majority of or during the visit. | Visitation where the monitor may be present for a portion of the visit. Parent(s) would have some time alone with their child. | Visits where the social worker may delineate degree and type of supervised activity on a case-by-case basis. The visitation plan would outline the structure of the supervision. Parent(s) may have some time alone with their child if the monitor ensures certain conditions. | Child may not be removed from the presence of the monitor. |
| Parent(s) can be alone with child. | Parent(s) can be alone with child. | Parent(s) can be alone with child for specific periods of time as determined by the visitation plan. | Parent(s) cannot be alone with their child. |

Safety assessment

| Unsupervised | Relaxed and/ or intermittent supervision, (including overnights) | Moderate/ structured supervision | Highly structured/strict supervision |
|---|--|---|--|
| <p>Unsupervised visitation would be used when the visitation assessment determines no safety concerns. This level may be used during the placement, but would be used immediately prior to reunification.</p> | <p>Intermittent supervision would be used to primarily offer the parents coaching and education. Visitation assessment determines few safety concerns, but a need for parental education and skill-building.</p> | <p>Structured supervision would be used to ensure a child's safety and offer the parents coaching and education. Visitation assessment determines safety factors that must be addressed in visitation plan.</p> | <p>Highly structured visitation would most likely be used if there is a high level of concern assessed for a child's physical or emotional safety during a visit. Parental coaching could be offered, but the primary concern would be child's safety.</p> |



Visitation location

| Unsupervised | Relaxed and/or intermittent supervision, (including overnights) | Moderate/structured supervision | Highly structured/strict supervision |
|---|---|---|--|
| <p>Parent determines visitation location.</p> | <p>Visitation location is home-like and offers parent(s) the opportunity to develop parenting skills or improve parent-child interactions. Visits may occur in more than one place, including appointments with therapists, or other professionals, and continue at the parents' home, relative's home, or other community setting.</p> | <p>Visitation location is home-like to offer parent(s) the opportunity to develop parenting skills and improve parent-child interactions, as well as manage safety concerns. Locations may include parents' home, relative's home, foster home, professional's office, park or other community setting.</p> | <p>Visitation location would ensure a highly structured visit. Locations may include a visitation center, agency's visiting room, residential treatment center, therapist's office or other locations.</p> |

Monitor's role

| Unsupervised | Relaxed and/or intermittent supervision, (including overnights) | Moderate/structured supervision | Highly structured/strict supervision |
|--|---|---|---|
| <p>No monitor. Parent(s) and social worker would communicate and provide feedback about the visit.</p> | <p>Monitor's role would be primarily designed to offer education, parenting skills and support for parent(s). Visitation plan would identify case goals that the monitor would work towards with education and support.</p> | <p>Visitation plan would develop monitor's role to manage safety concerns and offer parent(s) education and supports. An example may be to explain or show the parent(s) how to improve a parenting technique; or planned response to a parents' behavior during a visit that may be unsafe; or ensure that the parent(s) do not bring others to the visit.</p> | <p>Monitor's role would be strictly defined. Monitor and parent(s) would know the conditions required to maintain safe visits. Conditions would be included in the visitation plan.</p> |

Attachment III:

Three Phases of Visitation (Haight, 2001)

| Initial phase | | |
|---|---|--|
| Purpose | Safety consideration | Worker considerations |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Conduct assessments ■ Focus on assessment and goal planning ■ Mediate and problem solve ■ Identify the strengths, resources and capacity of parents and children that make reunification possible ■ Identify additional family needs that may hinder reunification ■ Provide modeling and healthy parenting practices ■ Facilitate goal planning related to visits and family contact ■ Engage parent(s) and children in the assessment and development of visitation plan ■ Build a relationship among parents, foster family, social worker and other family members. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assess parents' ability to provide for child's safety ■ Determine parents' capacity ■ Determine child's need to ensure physical and emotional safety for visitation planning ■ Observe if the child may be pressured by parent(s) or other family members to recant the allegations of maltreatment ■ Ensure visits are at the highest level of supervision and monitoring needed considering safety issues ■ Determine child's attachments and important relationships. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How can visits be structured to provide maximum family-child interactions? ■ How frequently does the child need parental contact to sustain the relationship? ■ Who does the child define as family? ■ What relationships are important to maintain, or build through visits, to support the child? ■ What relationships are important to maintain, or build through visits, to enhance the family's capacity? ■ What arrangements will minimize family stress and conflict? ■ Has there been any history of parents being threatening or harmful to child welfare staff or others? ■ How will the team deal with parents making promises that cannot or will not happen? ■ Does visitation planning consider communication and how a visit will be canceled? ■ How can visitation be used to clarify to all parties the reasons for placement? ■ How can visits be used to support a family's cultural or ethnic style? ■ How can visits be structured in a way that promotes the child's and family's trust in the social worker and foster parents? ■ If siblings are not placed together, are they having regular face-to-face and other types of contact? |

Middle phase

| Purpose | Safety consideration | Worker considerations |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Visitation activities provide a forum for parent(s) to demonstrate new skills, including modeling and building attachment ■ Parents continue to learn and practice new behaviors and responses to child's behaviors ■ Facilitates progress toward safety, permanency and well-being goals ■ Continue to assess ways in which visitation activities change to reflect the family's progress or needs ■ Assess the child and family's reactions to visits thus far to determine the family's potential for progress and reunification ■ Determine if there is a need to revise the visitation plan, and social workers' and foster parents' role in the visitation process ■ Plan for the shift of parental responsibility back to the parent(s). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Are the parent(s) demonstrating new skills that improve their capacity to keep a child safe? ■ Is the child safe with parent(s) without supervision? ■ Is the child safe on an overnight visit? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do visits provide activities for parent(s) to care for and play with their child at the child's level, promoting development? ■ Have there been positive changes in child's or parents' behavior, and communication that promote healthy attachment? ■ Do visits offer parent(s) the opportunity to enhance capacity to safely care for their children? ■ Do visits offer parent(s) the opportunity to utilize their individual strengths to enhance the child/parent attachment? ■ If a child has special needs, do visits offer parent(s) the opportunity to increase their understanding of their child's needs? ■ Do visits involve parent(s) in a child's daily care, activities and special events? ■ Are parent(s) involved in educational planning? ■ Do visits involve parent(s) in the child's homework and educational progress? ■ Do visits include parent(s) in the child's medical care? ■ Do visits maintain a child's relationships? ■ Do visits maintain a child's cultural connections? ■ Are parent(s) and foster parents supporting a child in the transition before and after visitation? ■ If siblings are not placed together, are they having regular face-to-face and other types of contact? |

Transition phase: reunification

| Purpose | Safety considerations | Worker considerations |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Decision has been made to reunify ■ Structure visits to ensure planned reunification ■ On-going assessments of the family relationship to support a stable reunification ■ Structure visits to identify and address remaining stress points in the relationship ■ Structure visits so that upon evaluation, it is clear to both the worker and the family that reunification is definite | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assess safety needs and develop a plan to reduce risk and likelihood of re-entry into foster care. ■ Ensure that the parents and foster parents are sharing significant information about the child's individual medical and mental health needs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How have visits demonstrated that parent(s) have enhanced capacity and skills to safely meet their child's day-to-day needs? ■ Do visits demonstrate that parent(s) have the supports in place to maintain a stable reunification? ■ Does the visitation plan continue to support a child's cultural and community connections? ■ Does the transition plan and visitation plan for reunification consider the sibling relationships and the need for ongoing contact? |

Transition phase: adoption or transfer of custody

| Purpose | Safety considerations | Worker considerations |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Decision has been made to seek permanency with an alternative family ■ On-going assessments of the family relationship to support permanency of the alternative permanency plan ■ If reunification with child's parent(s) is not possible, decisions must be made about permanency, the role of visitation during the transition period, and the role visitation to preserve a child's family connections ■ Structure visits to preserve the child's connections with family, relatives, community and culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assess safety needs and develop a plan to reduce risk and likelihood of re-entry into foster care. ■ Ensure that caregivers are sharing significant information about the child's individual medical and mental health needs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does the visitation plan continue to support a child's cultural and community connections? ■ If reunification is not possible, is a visitation routine in place that will develop relationships between a child's adoptive parent(s) or permanent caregivers that will preserve on-going connections after the permanency plan is finalized? ■ If siblings are not placed together, are they having regular face-to-face and other types of contact? ■ Does the transition plan and visitation plan for permanency consider the sibling relationships and the need for ongoing contact? |



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