

9. I HAVE THE RIGHT TO FREQUENT, MEANINGFUL CONTACT WITH MY CHILD.

The quality and frequency of parents' visits with their children is one of the best predictors of whether children will safely reunify with their parents. Visits help children feel safe despite separation and help families to repair frayed bonds. They keep parents motivated and give parents practice parenting their children in changed circumstances. However, many child welfare agencies grant parents the minimum visits required by law—as little as two hours a month in some jurisdictions—and allow parents and children to visit only in crowded, supervised agency visit rooms.

Families must have more time to connect, have the lowest level of visit supervision

possible and have the opportunity to spend time in positive settings, like libraries and playgrounds, whenever possible. Agencies must use visit rooms only when children may be at risk during visits, and must provide opportunities for families to be supervised by family members, foster parents, or community volunteers when supervision is absolutely necessary. Parents must be allowed to communicate regularly outside of visits, and have visits near their homes, at convenient times, and at no cost. Lawyers must press for increased visit time and unsupervised visits, and judges must ensure that children and their parents are supported in remaining connected.

A Year Without Visits

BY WANDA CHAMBERS

When my daughter was 6 months old, she went into foster care. Soon after, I got locked up. For a long time I could not get it right. But after Ebony had been in care a year and a half, I said to myself, "I'm going to start communicating with the agency." I was clean and thinking straight, and I was committed to getting her out of foster care.

I wrote letters and asked for reports and pictures of my daughter, but for a year I never got visits. She was 3 years old when I saw her again.

When I was released and began visiting, my daughter couldn't stand my living guts. She was afraid, and she was really not nice.

She wouldn't talk to me, she'd scream when I got near her. She'd sit under the desk for the whole visit, or keep running out in the hall to see her foster mother. I would keep reading, "And the bear said..." and if she looked at me I'd say, "Hello, Ebony." Of course I went home and cried.

I felt that the foster mother's presence during visits was making it harder for us to bond. I said, "I'm going to ask them to remove the foster mother from the agency during the time of my visit." She fought me tooth and nail, one mother fighting another mother.

Still, I went step by step—I went from supervised to community

visits to weekends. Ebony and I got closer when I was able to take her out to the park and do little things like do her hair and put on her shoes.

As my daughter's foster mother realized that my daughter was really on her way home, she began to be a friend to me. Now, years later, Ebony is home, but her former foster mother is still part of our lives. Ebony deserves that, since she and I were separated for so long.



Visit Hosts Help Families Reconnect

BY DAMARIS FIGUEROA

Last year, I signed up to be trained as a Visit Host, someone who can supervise family visits outside of foster care agency visit rooms. Visit Hosting allows families the opportunity to do all the things that families usually do together, like eat out and go to activities in their communities.

I began hosting visits for a couple and their beautiful 2-year-old daughter. We started out with three-hour visits every Tuesday and Thursday. It was exciting for the parents and their daughter to visit outside the agency visit room. We

did activities, like eating out at an Italian restaurant or a bagel place, trying scallops at a fancy Chinese restaurant and seeing a parade, and going to the movies and the park. The mom was very creative and she would bring party hats and little horns.

The little girl looked forward to our adventures. If I got to her foster home first on visit days, she would be eagerly waiting for the doorbell to ring again and her parents to arrive.

As time went on, the little girl grew increasingly more affectionate with her

parents. She began to talk more and sit still instead of running around the whole time. It seemed easier for the family to become closer while seeing new things and going different places.

Soon everything came to be about Mommy and Daddy. If she was sleepy, the little girl would call for Daddy. He would carry her and she would fall asleep on his shoulders or in his arms.

I hope that I will get the chance to be a Visit Host to another family. It makes me sad and angry when I think of how many other families have children in foster care

and never get to experience positive times with their children outside of agency visit rooms.

NEXT STEPS

We must demand that child welfare agencies in our communities:

- **Encourage positive relationships between parents and foster parents.** When parents and foster parents work together, kids go home more quickly and stay home. Kids in foster care get better care when the parent and foster parent exchange information about the child and work together to make visits positive. After reunification, the foster parent can become an ongoing support to the parent. Agencies must put structures in place, like an “icebreaker” meeting with the parent and foster parent soon after placement and mediation around conflicts.
- **Provide parenting classes that give parents the opportunity to practice what they’ve learned.** Parenting classes must include children in some classes so that parents can be supported in practicing what they’ve learned.

- **Create structures to support visits in the community.** To help parents move from supervised visits at the agency office to unsupervised visits at child-friendly places like parks, playgrounds, libraries, museums, and the homes of friends and family, agencies must train community members to become Visit Hosts, who will ensure children’s safety while supporting parents in caring for their children in more realistic and positive environments.

- **Provide coaching to assist parents with positive visits.** Many child welfare-affected parents feel overwhelmed during visits and are unused to intensity playing with children, or engaging them in conversation. Agencies must work with visit coaches trained to support parents in interacting with their children in ways that will help them to rebuild after separation.



Rise writer Erica Harrigan with her husband and daughter