

The Intensive Family Visitation Program

**An Innovative Approach to Early Permanence
by the Bibb County Department of Family and Children's Services**

Background

Research surrounding the relationship between parent/child visitation and reunification/permanency in child welfare has long been established (Fanshel, et al, 1990, *Foster Children in a Life Course Perspective*). In his landmark longitudinal study of the New York State foster care system, Fanshel found reunification strongly correlated with both how frequently birth parents visited with their child after removal, as well as how soon the first visit occurred.

Research also demonstrates visiting benefits children by:

- Reassuring them that their parents want to see them;
- Permitting them to experience and work through feelings stirred by the separation from their parents, thus allowing developmental gains; and
- Helping them maintain family ties while providing opportunities for family members to learn and practice new behaviors and styles of communicating (Hess and Proch, 1988, *Family Visiting in Out-of-Home Care: A Guide to Practice*).

The term “foster care drift” all too often describes the fate of children in DFCS custody, historically and currently, throughout the state of Georgia. In spite of significant federal legislation designed to ensure permanence (Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act – P.L. 96-272; Adoption and Safe Families Act), children often languish for years in the custody of the state, often moving from placement to placement, which has the tragic consequence of not only damaging the child’s ability to trust and form normal attachments to caregivers, but serves as a destructive force in their lives, much like the original maltreatment suffered in their birth families.

In an innovative and bold attempt to reverse this trend, the Bibb County Department of Family and Children’s Services has, in partnership with:

- The Methodist Home for Children and Youth
- The Macon-Bibb County Economic Opportunity Council
- The Bibb County Juvenile Court

opened the “Intensive Family Visitation Program” on October 15, 2008.

Program Description

Modeled after a program developed by the Salvation Army in Syracuse, New York, and after an extensive review of “Best Practice” literature, the Bibb County model has three main goals:

1. Frequent (2-3 times/week) and immediate (24 hours) visitation between parents and children following child removal by DFCS. Visitation should be structured, meaningful and purposeful for families.
2. Early permanency decisions via placement with “fit and willing” relatives within 30 days of entry into foster care, with custody remanded to the respective family members as soon as possible. “Concurrent Planning” as an initial goal also provides parents with the opportunity to be reunified with their children in many cases.
3. Professionally monitored visits between children and their parents, siblings and other relatives, with the purpose of maintaining attachments while expediting permanency decisions.

All visits are conducted under the supervision of either a “Family Coach” or Clinician through The Methodist Home’s Lighthouse for Families out of its Family Resource Center. This center was designed to be as warm, inviting and family-like as possible. Five visitation rooms are much like “living rooms”, with age-appropriate furniture and toys. The center also has a large kitchen and parents are encouraged to bring and prepare meals for their children, as they would at home.

A hallmark of the program is while DFCS case plans tend to focus on goals the parent must accomplish as an *adult* in order to reunify with their children, the Intensive Family Visitation Program focuses on the individualized *parenting* skills and knowledge that need to be developed and demonstrated, over time, by the parent. Following an assessment period, individualized goals are developed by the visitation staff, parent and DFCS case manager, in the form of an “Assessment Report” and “Assessment Conference”, within 21 days of removal. This process is designed to coincide with the multidisciplinary team (MDT) meeting that occurs at this milestone of the Comprehensive Child and Family Assessment Conference (CCFA). As such, the parental goals from the Visitation Program, which are guided by the following domains, depending on the age of the child(ren), become an official part of the recommendations of the CCFA:

- Nurturance
- Basic Care
- Developmental Stimulation (“play with a purpose”)
- Safety and Protection
- Discipline/Limit Setting

Goals are reviewed (and modified as needed) on a regular basis, at the “Six-Week Review” attended by all those originally involved in the Assessment Conference. Parental attendance at all scheduled visitations is carefully recorded and included as part of all reviews, as further evidence of parental motivation to practice and master the skills necessary to regain custody of their children.

All families are also assigned a Clinician, in addition to a Family Coach, upon referral. The Clinician works with the parent in individual, couples or family therapy, as appropriate, throughout the family's involvement in the program. Other therapeutic assessments/services are also provided:

- Substance Abuse Evaluations
- Domestic Violence Evaluations/Counseling
- Vocational Assessments
- Anger Management classes
- Attachment Assessments
- Trauma Therapy
- Play Therapy
- Parenting Classes
- The "Parenting Institute"

All contact between the Visitation Program and families is both supervised and carefully documented for decision making purposes by both Bibb County DFCS and the Juvenile Court.

Bibb County DFCS Programmatic Innovations

In order to maximize the effectiveness of the program, the Department has implemented the following procedures and practices:

1. Transportation is provided for all children for visits; parents are encouraged to provide their own transportation as evidence of their commitment towards reunification. Bus passes are given to parents who need them in order to visit their children by the Family Coach.
2. A separate foster care unit has been developed that is responsible for all new placements into foster care since October 15, 2008. These staff are housed at Lighthouse for Families and work hand-in-hand with the Visitation staff and transportation personnel.
3. A "Visitation Team" has been created, meeting weekly, that consists of:
 - County Director
 - Services Program Director
 - Agency Administrative Operations Manager
 - Vice-President of Clinical Services, Methodist Home for Children and Youth
 - Juvenile Court representative
 - Intake Case Managers and Supervisor from the newly created foster care unit

All children and families are reviewed who have come into care since the inception of the program. The team looks diligently for relatives as a placement resource and serves in a consultative capacity for workers trying to reunite children.

Initial Outcome Measures

Since October 15, 2008, when the model was implemented, the following outcomes have been realized, through February 9, 2009:

- Three (3) children have totally left DFCS custody;
- 17 children have been placed with relatives in a non-funded placement waiting on the non-reunification order remanding custody;
- Nine (9) children (two sibling groups) have just entered care and DFCS is in the process of completing home evaluations on relatives;
- One child has been placed in RYDC, with custody now shared between DFCS and DJJ;
- Two (2) children have entered care at the time of this report (2/9/09);
- 85% of the children placed in care since the program opened have visited with parents, siblings and/or relatives within seven days;
- 42% have visited within 24 hours. This figure has increased steadily as the program has continued to refine itself between collaborative partners (*current figure since 01/01/09 is 80%*);

Out of the total population of children in DFCS custody, 26 have left custody since the beginning of this program in October.

Summary

The creation and implementation of the Intensive Family Visitation Program in Bibb County, based on the collaboration between the aforementioned community agencies, has had an immediate, positive impact on both safety and permanency for children entering the foster care system since October, 2008. The continued success of the program, however, depends on the commitment of future funding by the State. It is a model that can and should be replicated throughout Georgia. The program would be both sustained and strengthened by:

- *Funding for FY 2009-2010 at the FY 2008-2009 level through Wrap-Around funds*
- Additional funding for more transportation personnel

Respectfully submitted by Bibb County DFCS and its collaborative partners, April 22, 2009.

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