

TRAUMA-INFORMED VISITATION IN TRIBAL CHILD WELFARE

Youth have a fundamental right to their families. Access to family needs to be freely given when it is safe to do so, and is not something to be earned or taken away from a youth who has been separated from their parents or caregivers. Having a child removed from one's care and being removed from one's home are traumatic experiences that regularly follow family members into the visitation environment. A caseworker can help facilitate a safe and supportive environment during visitation by recognizing interactions and behaviors that are trauma reactions to the removal experience and by responding with trauma-informed strategies that minimize re-traumatization during a family's time together. By increasing knowledge and skills about how to support and prepare parents or caregivers and their children for time together during visits, a caseworker is better equipped in their ability to be responsive and meet the unique needs of each family.

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE STRATEGIES FOR FAMILY VISITATION

Trauma-informed care provides space for tribal child welfare professionals to realize how common trauma experiences are, recognize various ways in which experiences can be traumatic, respond appropriately to a person's need for support, and resist re-traumatizing others by being aware and proactive in preventing future trauma experiences. The programmatic and caseworker practice strategies listed on the following pages align with the six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- SAFETY
- TRUST
- CULTURE AND HISTORY
- EMPOWERMENT
- PEER SUPPORT
- COLLABORATION



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PREPARATION FOR VISITS

What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Be familiar with various types of trauma experiences and how youth, parents, and caregivers can be impacted by those experiences.
 - Trauma in Indian Country: A Guide for Professionals
 - How do children of different ages experience trauma?
- Reflect on what you bring into the space and the relationship; consider how to be a good relative to the family.
- Build empathy by learning the stories of the parents or caregivers. Imagine being in their shoes.
- Know your role as the caseworker and practice explaining it clearly.
- Create visitation environments that facilitate and support more natural family time as much as possible (i.e., the ability to make meals and eat together, play games, read books, be outside, listen/ create music, draw/color, craft, play with toys, look at pictures, storytelling, etc.).
- Ensure youth ages 0-3 years old have a physically safe and developmentally appropriate visitation environment that nurtures their development.
- Remain flexible and get creative to work around barriers (e.g., illness, quarantine, work and school schedules, after-school activities, transportation challenges, etc.) that may prevent in-person family time. For example, consider increasing family contact using technology. How might virtual family time be successfully incorporated?
- Have a backup plan for when a parent or caregiver misses a scheduled visit.
 - How will you explain this to the youth and how can you support their feelings and emotions (e.g., sadness, disappointment, frustration, anger, fear, unloved, unworthy, etc.)? Consider books such as Mama's Waves or Daddy's Waves as resources.
- Work with parents and caregivers on developing lists of ideas and things to do that are age-appropriate and meet the developmental needs of each youth.
- Let the visit be about family time. Save paperwork, hard conversations, and decision-making for another time and space.
- Curate resources that will prepare parents or caregivers to connect with their children. The following handouts can help:



- What You Need to Know About Visits
- Making the Most of Visits
- Helping Children Heal During Visits
- After a Crisis: How Young Children Heal
- Handling Painful Feelings in Visits
- Be clear, be real, and be honest. Parents and caregivers need to hear directly what is going well, and if something is unsafe and why. Avoid using acronyms and jargon or assuming that a parent or caregiver understands.
- Remember, it's not personal; you represent the system that has separated their family.

PREPARING PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS FOR VISITATION

What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Name, validate, and normalize common emotions, such as:
 - Anger at the system
 - Fear of what will happen next
 - Nervousness to see their child
 - Shame for what has taken place in their family
- Ask the parents or caregivers what they need to ready themselves for the visit, such as:
 - Praying
 - Meditation
 - Smudging
 - Listening to music
 - Calling a supportive friend
- Prepare parents or caregivers for questions their children might have; brainstorm answers they can offer in those moments.
- Prepare parents for behaviors their children may exhibit during the visit and explore supportive ways the parents can respond.
- Talk with the parents or caregivers about what to bring to the visit that will support the success of their family time. For example: favorite snacks, meals, toys from home, board games, books, and pictures of family.
- Clearly and succinctly explain visit expectations.
- Display clear and succinct visitation ground rules and expectations on the wall that every family is required to follow during each visitation.

PREPARING YOUTH FOR VISITATION

What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Consider how to prepare the youth for a visit and what is needed to support them during and after the visit, including the context of the youth's:
 - Age and development
 - Desire to see their parent or caregiver
 - Emotional, psychological, and physical state
 - Ability to process or debrief the visit
 - Access to and participation in cultural or therapeutic support
 - Ability to set appropriate boundaries
 - Capacity to alert a trusted adult if they feel emotionally or physically unsafe
 - Ability to verbalize when they need a break during the visit
- Offer to spend time with the youth to prepare for and debrief what may happen and how they may feel.
- Provide explanations that are developmentally appropriate.
- Offer resources to youth that offer language and an understanding of what they are experiencing:
 - A Guide for Youth: Understanding Trauma
 - You Weren't with Me
 - Once I Was Very Very Scared
- Schedule visits that avoid disruptions to the youth's schedule (e.g., school, activities, naps).
- Identify an object the youth finds comforting and can bring to and from the visit (e.g., stuffed animal, blanket, basketball, photo, etc.).
- Teach and practice self-regulation techniques the youth can use during the visit:
 - Taking deep breaths
 - Asking for a break or help
 - Stretching
 - Giving themselves a hug
 - Drinking a cold glass of water



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Approach to Visiting: Implementation Guide](#)

This document from RISE includes tools, activities, and training tips for frontline staff and parents.

[How can frequent, quality family time promote relationships and permanency?](#)

This Casey Family Programs fact sheet focuses on the benefits of family time for both children and parents and provides examples of successes and lessons learned from the field.

[Ozha Wahbeganniss: Exploring Supervised Visitation and Exchange Services in Native American Communities](#)

This document includes considerations of the dynamics of domestic violence within the context of supervised visitation.

