

HOW TO CREATE

Meaningful Family Time

with Young Children

**A guide for parents of babies and toddlers
involved in the child welfare system**

Harris Professional Development Network
Child Welfare Committee
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**PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT
NETWORK**
IRVING HARRIS FOUNDATION

3 ways to make the most of family time visitation

1. Try these relationship-building activities with babies and toddlers.
2. Use these family time tips.
3. Learn why family time is important.



1. Relationship-Building Activities

Below are suggested relationship-building activities you can do with your baby or toddler during family time visits. These activities will help your child learn and grow, and strengthen your relationship with your child.

Ideas for In-Person Family Time Activities (Adapted from Hess & Proch, 1988)

INFANTS

- Feed, hold, and cuddle
- Change diaper
- Play peek-a-boo
- Help with standing or walking
- Name objects or read picture books
- Play together with colorful toys that move or make noise
- Sing a lullaby or do a fingerplay

TODDLERS

- Read simple stories
- Pretend to “clean house” or “go to the store”
- Play music and dance
- Go to parks and allow your baby to ride a tricycle
- Draw pictures
- Allow choices, when possible
- Make and consistently enforce rules such as no hitting or stopping dangerous behavior

Ideas for Virtual Family Time Activities (Adapted from Rose Wentz, 2020)

INFANTS

- Plan frequent and short visits (10-15 minutes)
- Set up your screen so your baby can clearly see your face and you can make eye contact
- Ask the person who is caring for your baby if they will feed him or her during visit
- If possible, give the caregiver an item that has your scent on it and ask the caregiver to put it near your baby
- Ask the caregiver to put toys in front of the baby and watch and talk about how your baby plays with them
- Sing a lullaby or do finger-play

TODDLERS

- Allow movement and activity (ask the caregiver to follow your child with the screen)
- Invite the caregiver to stay with you and your toddler
- Be flexible in changing activities
- Go with the flow of the child, rather than trying to gain their focus
- Talk about what your child is doing and comment on what your child is doing
- Bring toys for pretend play
- Allow the child to show you his or her room, toys, or art
- Shift to outside play
- Sing, play music, and dance

Transitions and Play During Virtual Family Time

(Adapted from Kerrie LaRosa, LMSW, 2020)

TRANSITIONS

- Start and end family time with the same greeting or activity. Beginning and ending family time in the same way each time provides comfort for your child and establishes a routine, especially towards the end of family time.
- Start each family time meeting with the simple, short greeting such as “mommy is here sweet baby.”
- End each meeting by singing a song, saying a prayer, or reading a short book.
- Tell your child that you will see them again. Give time frames to visit “after lunch” or “in two sleeps.”
- Say “good-bye, I love you” and blow kisses.

PLAY

- Play peek-a-boo using your hands over your face, duck away from the screen, or use a doll or stuffed animal.
- Use puppets or stuffed animals, or draw faces on your fingers for finger puppets.
- Show toys, describe them, and create a story around them.
- Ask the child to show you toys and imitate what he or she does with the toy.
- Repeat the child’s words and sounds back to him or her.
- Use blocks, show stacking, and count as you stack.
- Play a musical instrument or sing (if you don’t have an instrument you can make a simple drum or bell).
- For infants, read simple, short books and show them the pictures in the book.
- Read books to your child, pointing out the photos and naming or counting objects, animals, or shapes in the book (for babies, read simple, short books)



2. Family Time Tips

The tips below provide important information to help you follow the judge's orders and make family time visits safe and meaningful.

Be Safe and Feel Safe.

BE SAFE (PHYSICAL SAFETY)

- Tell your case worker ahead of time if you know of anything that might affect the physical safety of your child. (examples: my uncle smokes and will be at the house, or there may be drugs at the family time location, or the park where the family time visit is held is unsafe).
- Arrive a few minutes early to make sure the location of the visit is clean and safe. (examples: ask people nearby not to smoke, move toys that are not safe for baby).
- Call your caseworker ahead of time if you have been drinking, are high, or not feeling well. Ask to reschedule the family time visit.
- Keep focused on your child's safety. (example: leave your phone in your pocket or car, follow your toddler around).

FEEL SAFE (EMOTIONAL SAFETY):

- If your family time visits must be supervised, tell your case worker about trusted adults your child knows. They may be allowed to supervise the family time visit.
- Be aware of any people, places, or things that might make your child feel unsafe. (example: dogs or loud noises, other adult at the family time visit who may make your child feel scared).
- Help your child feel safe by staying close by and sitting on the floor or low chair.
- If your child is upset, speak calmly with reassuring words or hugs.
- If your child says hurtful words or does not want to cuddle with you, try not to take it personally. Feeling angry about being apart from a parent is normal.
- If visits aren't going as well as you'd like, ask your therapist, case worker, or other trusted adult for suggestions for how to make it better.
- Sometimes children do better with their current caregiver in the room. This will help them feel safe until the caregiver can transition out and you can be alone with your child. Remain positive and focused on helping your child feel safe and happy.

Make it Meaningful.

BEFORE EACH FAMILY TIME VISIT:

- Think about what you want to get out of the visit and how best to do that.
- Remember the things that your child likes best. Bring favorite things from home to share during the visit (examples: foods, toys, books).
- Think back to the last visit. Plan more of what worked and try changing things that did not work as well.
- Bring supplies for activities that you would normally do with your child such as styling hair, cooking, reading a book, blowing bubbles, coloring or making crafts.
- Consider if including the family dog or sibling or grandparent or other important people in your child's life might enrich the visit without overwhelming the child.

AFTER EACH FAMILY TIME VISIT:

- Think back on your family time together and how your child responded. What worked and what didn't work? Ask for ideas to improve the next family time visit.
- Separations and reunions can be stressful for both you and your child. You can decrease stress by staying in touch often and reassuring about how much you love your child.

DURING EACH FAMILY TIME VISIT:

- Connect with your child. Make eye contact, get down to your child's level, and tell your child you are happy to be together.
- Give your full attention to your child as you carry out regular parenting activities like mealtime, bath time, cuddling, and reading together. Respond and talk to your baby.
- Sing, read, talk, laugh, and play together. Learn what your child likes to do by watching your child's reaction. Welcome your child to hug or sit on your lap.
- Your child may be scared and confused. This may show up as tantrums, anger, sadness, or pushing away. Comfort your child. If you see your child turning away hugs or kisses from you, step back and allow your child to connect slowly with you. Try not to take it personally.
- After a period of play, children may be tired and fall asleep. It is also comforting to them to be held while they sleep. If your child sleeps during each family time visit, you may need to ask your case worker to change the time change the time of the visitation.

Follow a Family Time Schedule.

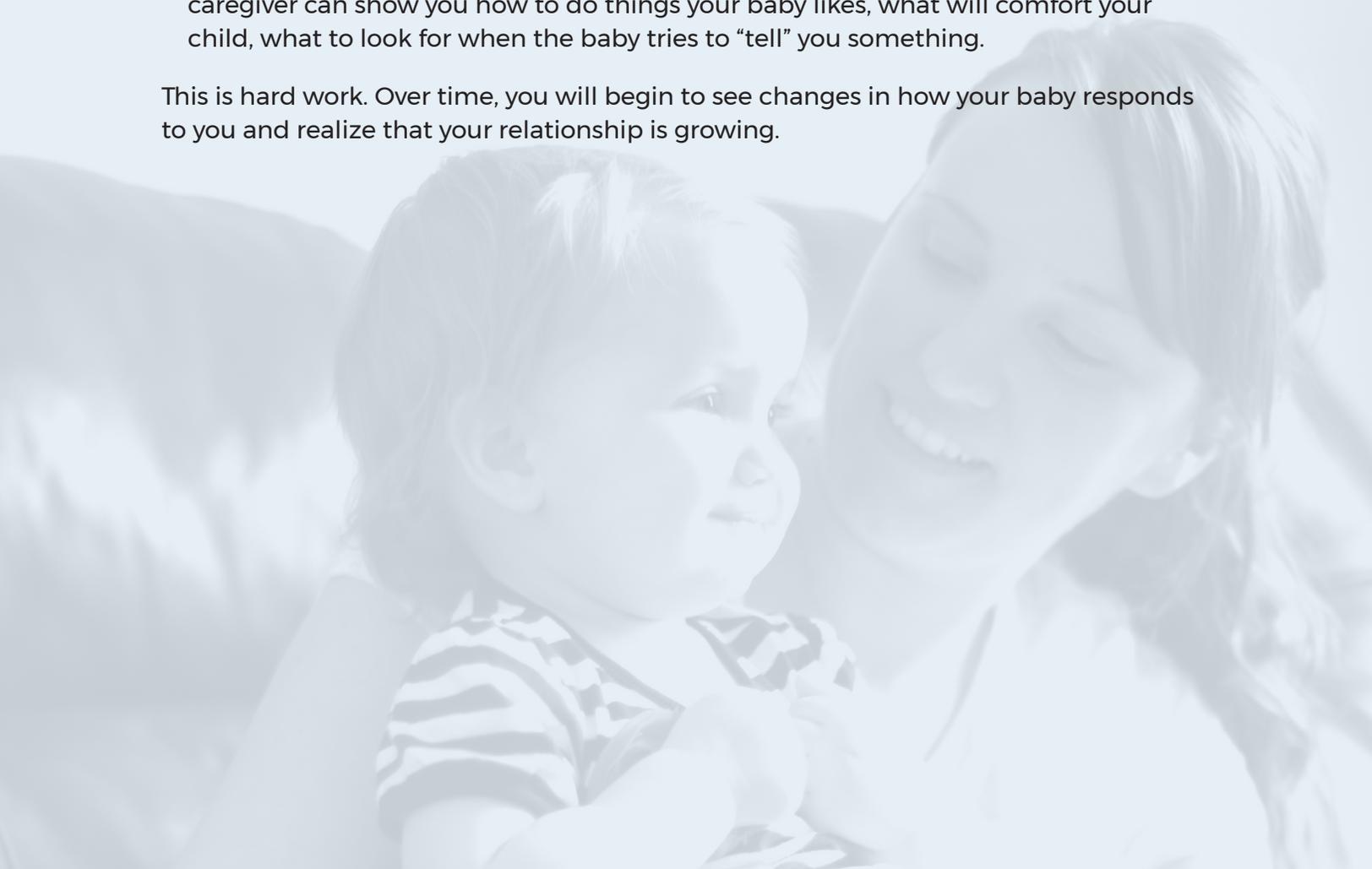
- Request to spend time with your child as soon as possible after your child has been removed from your care.
- Let others know which days and times work for your schedule and do not conflict with your child's routine and needs (such as naptime, bedtime, and appointments).
- Commit to the dates and times and use a reliable reminder (phone or calendar).
- If you cannot visit for any reason, notify the necessary people as soon as possible.
- Because traveling is hard on young children, it is best for you to travel to the child, rather than the child traveling to you.
- Get transportation in advance and have a back-up plan. (plan to drive, get a ride, take the bus, ask for gas card or bus pass)
- Knowing that young children need frequent contact, ask for daily contact if possible. Consider all the other ways that you can stay connected, including reading, singing, and talking using the phone or video chats. You can send a picture of you and your baby together for the child to look at in between family time visits.
- Ask more and longer visits as you make progress in your case plan.
- Ask if you can go to your child's child care center, medical appointments, religious services, or haircut.

An important note to parents who may not have a relationship with their children prior to starting family time visits:

It is normal for children around nine months old to begin to get upset around people who are new to them, even their own parents. If this applies to you, know that it is possible to change this by working hard to build a relationship with your child. There are four ways to do this:

- 1. Spend as much time as possible with your baby/toddler.** Try for daily contact. Hopefully, you can see your child several times each week in-person, in addition to seeing or talking on the phone or computer every day.
- 2. Respond to your baby/toddler's needs.** If your child is crying, give comfort. If your child is hungry, feed her. Change diapers, read books, sing songs, cuddle, and learn how your child will show you what he or she needs.
- 3. Get to know the person who is caring for your child and ask for help.** Your child's caregiver can show you how to do things your baby likes, what will comfort your child, what to look for when the baby tries to "tell" you something.

This is hard work. Over time, you will begin to see changes in how your baby responds to you and realize that your relationship is growing.



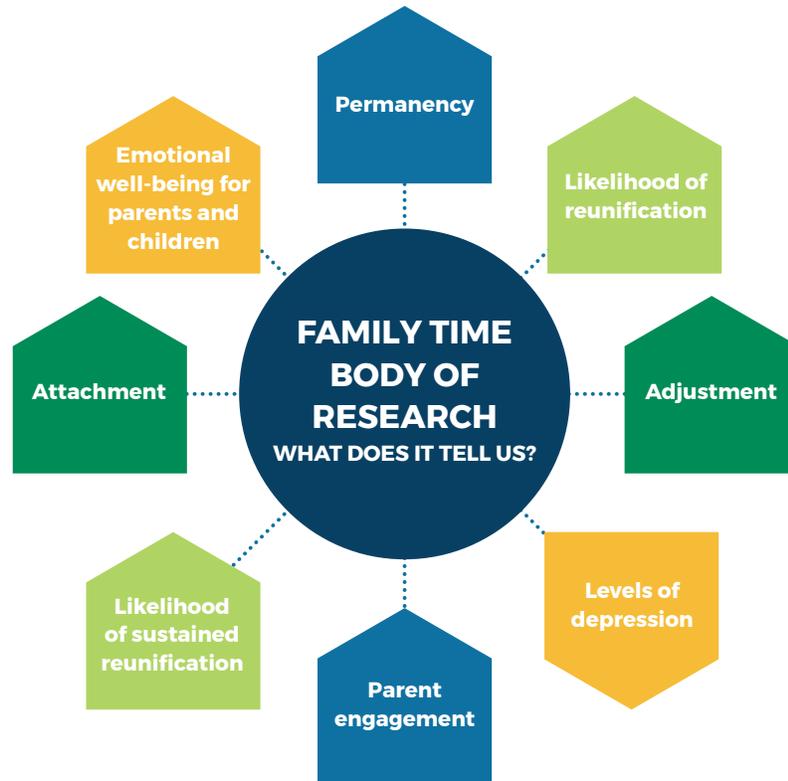
A note for parents who surrender their parental rights or whose rights are terminated:

- The goal in child welfare court is to help you do the things you need to do to reunify with your child. Family time visitation is a key part in rebuilding a relationship and showing the judge that your child is safe.
- Some parents decide it is not the time to be a parent and will surrender (give up) their parental rights. Some parents will want to work through the court process. In most cases, parents are able to complete their case plan and the judge returns the children to their care. If the judge decides reunification with parents isn't safe or possible, then the judge will require that the child live in a different permanent home. The judge may terminate parental rights or, in some cases, the judge may determine another option such as permanent guardianship.
- No matter how you decide to move forward, remember the gift of life that you have given to your child, and the hopes and dreams that you have for them.
- If you are surrendering your parental rights, or your rights are being terminated, consider talking with your therapist, case worker, trusted friend, or religious/faith guide about the support you will need and how to say goodbye.
- Share your wishes for your child's future.
- If you would like final family time visits, talk with your attorney and ask the judge.
- Let your child know of your love. Write a love letter or bring a photo or something meaningful to give to your child at final visits. Have someone take pictures of both you and your child.
- When it is time to go, support the child by being calm and telling him or her everything will be okay.
- Know that you may be overwhelmed with sadness. Continue with your therapy or treatment programs. Reach out for on-going support during this difficult time.



3. Why is Family Time Important?

Family time is connected to many positive outcomes for children and parents.



It is important to learn what the research tells us about young children.

Research tells us:

- the early years are really important in shaping our lifelong development and health
- babies and toddlers depend their adult caregivers to learn and grow
- young children depend on their caregivers to comfort and soothe them when they are upset, which helps them feel safe and secure

- family time visits increase bonding and attachment, and the likelihood of reunification

Family time gives us hope that relationships can be repaired. Frequent visitation and healthy connections with your child can reduce the time apart!

Read and consider how you can use this information to strengthen family time and the relationship with your child.



Early Childhood Development

ESTABLISHING LIFELONG GOOD HEALTH

THE SCIENCE

The best chance for healthy human development starts when children are babies and toddlers. Babies learn by copying those around them. Parents talk them into talking, sing them into singing, and love them into loving. Stable, caring, nurturing relationships in the early years shape lifelong health and development.

THE CHILD WELFARE CONNECTION

The first five years of life offer the most opportunity for development and the greatest impact from harm. When parents are not dependable or protective, children feel unsafe and unhappy. Children need stable loving caregivers to learn to thrive in a trusting relationship.

REFLECTION: What do I need to learn about my child's developmental needs when planning for family time and who can I ask to learn more?



Neuroscience

GROWING THE BEST BRAIN

THE SCIENCE

The first 1,000 days of life is the most important time for brain development. Amazingly, 80% of the brain develops from birth to age three and 90% by age five. Talking, singing, reading, and other nurturing experiences build healthy brains. Trusting relationships build pathways for the skills needed for good mental health and social emotional development.

THE CHILD WELFARE CONNECTION

If young children feel alone, unsafe, have unmet needs, and other bad experiences, the brain begins to see the world as an unsafe, unstable place. Young children who do not have positive relationships may not have healthy brain growth - something that can lead to problems later in life.

REFLECTION: Knowing that talking, reading, singing, and nurturing relationships are critical to brain development, what can I do during family time to help my child's brain grow?



Attachment

BUILDING AN EMOTIONAL FOUNDATION

THE SCIENCE

Babies are born ready for relationships. Early relationships can support positive emotional health and well-being, or they can set a negative path that continues throughout the life span. Young children need a lot of contact with parents and caregivers in order to develop and keep meaningful attachments, which can form the base for a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

THE CHILD WELFARE CONNECTION

When a young child is removed from his or her parents care, the child may not feel safe and stable, and may not trust the adults around them. Children who cannot depend on their caregivers to provide nurturance, protection, and security often do not want to make new attachments. Or, they may develop unhealthy attachments, and have challenging behavior as their emotional needs go unmet. Stable, nurturing relationships help children thrive.

REFLECTION: What can I do to build or strengthen my relationship with my child? How can I do this in a way that is comfortable for my child who may initially be fearful or may not really know me? How can I support my child's development in their foster home so they can more easily return to me?



Trauma

REDUCING RISK FACTORS

THE SCIENCE

A famous study called the Adverse Childhood Experiences (or ACE) study found a strong link between disturbing experiences (trauma) during childhood and lifelong physical and mental health problems. Many adult issues, including chronic diseases, drug and alcohol use, depression, and other mental health conditions, are now understood to be related to harmful events from childhood and trauma passed down from many generations.

THE CHILD WELFARE CONNECTION

Children in the child welfare system have experienced trauma. Many parents involved in the child welfare system also struggle with their own traumatic experiences. Fortunately, trauma can be prevented or healed, in babies and adults. Programs that focus on both parent and child can repair and heal trauma and stop the cycle of passing trauma from one generation to the next.

REFLECTION: Do I feel stress during family time visits? How do I identify stress in my child and reassure safety during family time visits? Am I getting the help that I need to deal with bad things that happened to me?



Implicit Bias

KEEPING ASSUMPTIONS IN CHECK

THE SCIENCE

Implicit bias is a term that describes when stereotypes or attitudes affect our actions or decisions without us realizing it. Biases begin early and are shaped throughout our life. The biases people have can make them treat others unfairly, even if that is not what they wanted.

THE CHILD WELFARE CONNECTION

Parents in the child welfare system might sometimes be treated unfairly by professionals who have implicit bias towards certain groups of people. If parents suspect that might be the case, they should first seek support from their attorneys.

REFLECTION: Do I feel like people in the child welfare system have prejudices toward me or my child? Does this effect our family time visits? How can I address this and who do I trust who can help me?



Resilience

PROMOTING FACTORS THAT PROTECT

THE SCIENCE

Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” after difficult things happen. The most important way a child builds resilience is to have the support of at least one stable relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult. These relationships provide the love, care, and protection that can help children learn and grow. Relationships also help children develop the ability to plan, calm themselves, and adapt to change. In addition to relationships within families, relationships in the community can help build resilience by offering supportive services, helping people stay healthy, and treating all people in a fair manner.

THE CHILD WELFARE CONNECTION

The child welfare system recognizes the importance of resilience and wants to help parents and children: become more resilient; have connections within their community; learn about good ways to parent; get help when needed; and make sure that children have good social and emotional skills.

REFLECTION: How can I build resilience for me and my child?