

FIRST STEPS TOGETHER

FAMILIES IN RECOVERY SUPPORT

NEWSLETTER



SUPPORTING PARENT-CHILD VISITATION



The theme of this month's newsletter is *Supporting Parent-Child Visitation*. It is a lot for our participants to emotionally, mentally, and logistically prepare for supervised visits. They are balancing hopes to connect with their children while also tending to their own experience and self-care in the periods between visits. We have included many concrete tips and tools that focus specifically on how to help parents feel supported and prepared for what to expect before, during, and after visits with their children. You may notice that throughout the newsletter we often refer to supervised visits as "family time." We all know that the language we use has the power to shape our experiences. Talking about visits in this way places the emphasis on the opportunity for the parent and child to connect, in spite of the circumstances.

HOW TO SUPPORT PARENTS FOR A SUPERVISED VISIT

BEFORE THE VISIT

Helping parents prepare for a visit is important and is a big part of ensuring that the visit is child focused. Thinking ahead with your client about what to bring and having ideas in advance for age appropriate activities can go a long way toward easing any anxiety they may feel about the visit. Planning for "family time" and having a discussion before the visit also presents an opportunity for parents to share their feelings and discuss their goals for the time they will be spending with their child/children.

DURING THE VISIT

During the visit can be a challenging time for our participants. They may be overwhelmed with emotions, feeling the pressure of having someone watch them and potentially struggling to handle their child's behavior. This may be particularly true for families who are managing multiple children of different ages. It may be helpful to support your participants in practicing responses to difficult questions their children might ask, to review their plan, and come up with a quick breathing exercise or grounding phrase they can use to manage stress during the visit.

AFTER A VISIT

After a visit, parents are likely to have a range of reactions, feelings, thoughts, and questions that came up in the time they spent with their child. Clients may feel excited, disappointed, sad, angry, vulnerable or any combination of emotions. This can also be a high risk time for relapse. Dedicating time to support the families you are working with after a visit is a good opportunity to explore and process together the thoughts and feelings that come up for them in terms of both their parenting as well as their recovery journey, it can also be a good time to revisit their relapse prevention plans.

VISIT BACKPACK



Square One in Springfield has been using visit backpacks for years. They were originally created to be used with moms who were incarcerated for their visits with their children. They are now also used for parent-child visitation and as a tool for home visits to provide activities for parents and children to do together. The bags are geared towards infant and child development.

Every backpack has a reading activity and something that focuses on motor skill development using the included children's book and age appropriate toys.

Amanda Kelley, Family Recovery Support Specialist (FRSS) at Square One shared some thoughts about the backpacks:

Visit backpacks at the CHD Pittsfield Office

"I enjoy how they can be used in so many different ways. I have moms that struggle with reading to their kids, for some parents it is a really hard concept. This makes it easy. If you have an animal book and can hand them the toys one at a time it makes it all engaging.

With families that have supervised visits at a DCF office, the only place they can see their kid, those rooms are often not conducive to child development. If you have a young child they want to be on the floor playing with something. Maybe a parent doesn't know what to bring every week or wants to switch it up, this takes the pressure off the mom to scramble to come up with what to do in this one hour period of time.

That human interaction and bonding that is key and that is what these backpacks create – that one on one time that sticks, it's human interaction, not staring at a screen, that's what creates a parent child relationship."

FAMILY TIME SNACK TIPS

When visiting your child for an hour or more, it is a good idea to bring a snack and drink to the visit. If the visit takes place during a mealtime or is for an extended period of time, you may want to bring a meal that you can share together.

Sharing a meal with your child is a great way to connect to them by bringing foods that are part of your family's culture and traditions and engaging in mealtime conversation.

While sharing a snack or meal with your child: Talk about what you are eating (What food group? Where does the food come from? Does it grow in the ground? What color is it?) Involve them in preparing the food, set up your table space together, clean up together.

Adapted from Square One's flyer, "Parent-Child Visit Snack Tips"



Snack Ideas:

- Rainbow goldfish
- Grapes and pretzel sticks (make sure to cut the grapes for small children)
- Peanut butter and banana bites
- Yogurt and fruit cup (add granola for a crunch)
- Mini muffins
- Cheese sticks
- Juice boxes
- Milk or water
- Cheese and crackers
- Fruit snacks
- Veggies (baby carrots, celery, cucumbers)
- Raisins

Some ideas for snack time:

- Use rainbow goldfish or different colored fruits and veggies for counting and color identification.
- Use a cookie, yogurt and fruit to make mini fruit pizzas.
- Use pretzel sticks and grapes to make a family tree.
- Take time to discuss your family and how many people love your child.
- Let your child make their own snack creation from the ingredients you brought, have fun with it!

HOLDING SPACE FOR YOURSELF

Holding space for FIRST Steps Together participants who are experiencing separation from their children can be difficult, especially for those of us with lived experience. **Supporting families through this process can be painful and may bring up big feelings around our own personal experiences. We need to hold space for ourselves also.**

Recently, I was in a local DCF office for a meeting. I found myself standing in a packed waiting room, full of parents visiting their infants. As I looked around the room taking in all the sadness, fear and stress, mixed with joy and wonder, I was transported back to a time when I was that mother in that room. The mother who had not yet found recovery, who desperately wanted to be present for my children, yet was overwhelmed with guilt, anxiety, anger and embarrassment. The mother who lacked the capacity and tools to handle what was happening with my children and seek the help I needed to get better. The broken mother who was trying to cherish that short visit yet counting the seconds until it was over because it was so painful. In that moment, in that waiting room, I turned to my coworker, anxiously told her what I was experiencing, and started to cry. I made it through our meeting and moved on to the next task for the day, but I was not ok. I was able to later process with my supervisor, my coworkers and a loved one, but I spent the rest of the day trying to put my pieces back together. After my family was in bed for the night, I sat quietly with my baby, reminding myself of all my blessings and the gifts of recovery, giving myself grace and understanding, and once again forgiving myself for my past mistakes.

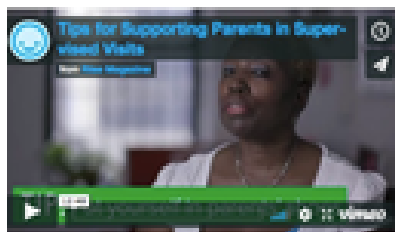
I'm sharing this personal experience with you to remind you to hold space for yourself. Every day we walk alongside mothers and families as they navigate systems and work toward their recovery. Sometimes it's messy and frustrating, other times it's wonderful and rewarding, but through all those moments we need to take care of ourselves. It's ok to say

"this is too much" or "I need a break." It's ok to turn off your phone and take some time for you and your family. Not only is it ok, it's necessary. We never know when moments like this can affect us. I've supported many parents through visits, I've even been the one to supervise them, but something about that space last week hit me harder than I would have expected. **Take time to acknowledge that this work is hard. Just like we encourage our participants to take care of themselves, we must do the same in our own lives.** Giving ourselves the time we need to process and heal is what keeps us from burnout, compassion fatigue and even relapse. Share with your supervisors. Talk to your loved ones, coworkers or therapist. Go to a meeting or whatever you do to maintain your recovery. Remember to hold space for you.

- Erica Napolitan, Program Specialist



VIDEO FOR FRONTLINE STAFF: TIPS FOR SUPPORTING PARENTS IN SUPERVISED VISITS



From [Rise](#), this video, "[Video for Frontline Staff: Tips for Supporting Parents in Supervised Visits](#)," features four parents who offer guidance to frontline staff on how to work with parents to create positive visits with children in foster care. Rise also offers tip handouts on [Making the Most of Visits](#), [Handling Painful Feelings](#), and [Helping Children Heal](#). Rise's mission is to train parents to write and speak about their experiences in order to support parents and parent advocates and to guide child welfare professionals in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

SUCCESS SPOTLIGHT: CHD HAMPSHIRE COUNTY OPEN HOUSE!

The Center for Human Development (CHD) Easthampton site hosted an Open House recently and welcomed in treatment providers, DCF, mental health agencies and other community supporters to their new offices.

Program Director Sabrina Stiles "We were really happy with the turnout. The event created an opportunity for open conversations that let people in the community know that FIRST Steps Together is here and ready to do great work with people in the area. We received some referrals after the Open House and are looking to continue to build on the connections made."



Staff from CHD Hampshire County at the Open House!

Debra Bercuvitz, FIRST Steps Together Project Director, was in attendance and shared, "the Open House was full of welcoming energy. Parents and young children playing together in the colorful play space, staff showing off their office space and explaining FIRST Steps Together services, and people engaging in conversation in every doorway. A service provider came up to me and said that this was such an important and needed new resource for Hampshire County, and that he was looking forward to telling people about the supports available through the program. He congratulated us on our vision."

RESEARCH ON WHY IS VISITATION IS IMPORTANT

Research has shown that more frequent family time can have positive impacts on not only the parent but the child as well. One opportunity we have in our role with FIRST Steps Together is to advocate for families around visitation. That may include advocating for more frequency or flexibility with setting or timing. Some highlights from the research show:

Research shows us that regular visits can:

- Maintain parent-child attachment
- Calm children's separation fears

Frequent visits also affect children's well-being. Children visited frequently by their parents may be:

- Less likely to have emotional outbursts, tension, and conflict
- Less likely to be referred for psychiatric services
- Less likely to engage in delinquent or antisocial acts such as vandalism, stealing, and running away

One study showed that children visited at least once every two weeks had fewer behavioral problems and exhibited less anxiety and depression than children visited infrequently or not at all.

From [11/10, Vol.15, No.1 Fostering Perspectives](#), sponsored by the North Carolina Division of Social Services, Say So (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out), & Family and Children's Resource Program.

PARENTS HELPING PARENTS



Parents Helping Parents is a group of parents from around Massachusetts who support one other. They offer free support groups and host a free, private 24/7 parental stress help line at 1-800-632-8188. They also have a guide titled ***You Are Not Alone: An Empowering Guide for Parents Whose Children are in DCF Foster Care*** that is written by parents, for parents, and available to download for free in English and Spanish.

BUILDING COLLABORATIONS



Building and maintaining team-oriented relationships with other providers can help support our families in times of custody changes and around “family time”/visitation. Other providers might not be aware of changes in custody or that a visit is scheduled to take place. They might not know about the additional stressors

that a client may experience before or after seeing their child or children who are not currently in their full-time care. We can encourage participants to share this information with their treatment providers, or we can communicate this information directly with their treatment providers, with the parent’s permission. Other providers might be able to provide additional supports, incorporate family time preparation and processing into therapy, look out for an increased risk of use or overdose, or even just have the sensitivity and understanding to reach out if someone misses one or more appointments.

Another kind of collaboration may include FIRST Steps Together sites partnering with DCF staff and families so that (when appropriate) children can attend FIRST Steps Together parent-child groups, play groups, or field trips as part of their family time.

Collaboration with DCF staff can also help to foster common understanding of the trauma that parents and children can experience with out-of-home placements. Talking together can help everyone to recognize that grief and loss may manifest in parents’ behaviors in a number of ways, such as last-minute cancellations or hostility, or in children’s increased distress before or after family visits. Taking a collaborative team approach can help providers and DCF staff alike to look at the underlying reasons for certain behaviors and to engage in trauma-informed problem solving with and for the family.

Debra Bercovitz
Director, FIRST Steps Together
MA Department of Public Health

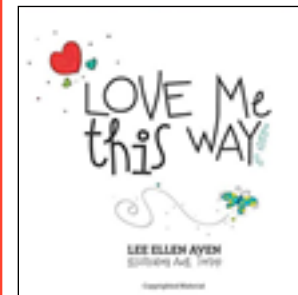
BOOK RECOMENDATIONS



[Once I Was Very Scared](#) by Chandra Ghosh Ippen This book was designed to help young children who have experienced stressful or traumatic events.

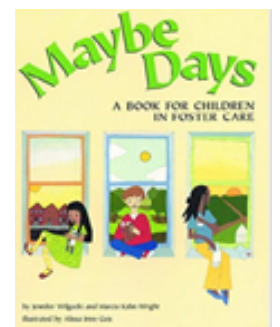
[You Weren't With Me](#)

by Chandra Ghosh Ippen. This story was designed to help parents and children talk about difficult separations, reconnect, and find their way back to each other.



[Love Me This Way](#) by Lee Ellen Aven This delightfully illustrated book is a primer on unconditional love told from the child's point of view.

[Maybe Days](#) by Jennifer Wilgocki is a straightforward look at the issues of foster care, the questions that children ask, and the feelings that they confront.



[The Kissing Hand](#) by Audrey Penn is used to reassure children upset by separation anxiety.

HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR PARTICIPANTS IN MAINTAINING THEIR CONNECTION WITH THEIR CHILDREN

It can be challenging for parents to maintain their connection with their children during supervised visits. Parents might feel pressured or scrutinized during visits. The room may feel empty and lack toys or comfort objects and both parent and child may miss being able to be outdoors or engaging in usual activities. Parents also may have a whole host of emotions associated with the separation. Guilt, shame, resentment, anger, hopelessness, inadequacy, fear, and sometimes relief, are all natural feelings to have in response to this type of separation. When supporting our participants in maintaining their connection with their children, both while they are together and also when they are apart, we can help families keep a few things in mind:

How to “frame” the separation for their child

Help your participant think about how they want to talk about this separation with their child, regardless of the age of their child. Maybe they want to say that they are taking time to get well, or to work on certain things that need to be better before their child can come home again. It’s important to keep in mind that the child or children are already trying to make sense of what’s going on and probably have lots of feelings and questions about the separation. Even if it may be really uncomfortable, having this conversation can help their child make sense of things in an age appropriate way.

How to spend the time together

Help your participant think about having some routine or structure in this time together that the child can anticipate and look forward to. This could be a favorite snack, a special hello or goodbye, a favorite activity or a comforting phrase or song. With so much unknown and so much out of their control, having their parents be consistent, as much as possible, can help the child feel more contained. Parents are likely to have many feelings about the separation, DCF, or other outside pressures. While it is important for our participants to be able to express themselves with their children, we also want to support families in considering the experience from the child's point of view in order to minimize exposing the children to additional stress during these times together.



How to “hold each other in mind” when apart

Going from parenting children full time to only seeing them for one hour a week while supervised, can be an incredibly hard experience for the parents in a family. The change in family time can also be hard for children. It may be almost too painful for your participants to hold their children in mind, and we want to be mindful that this can be a very high-risk period for relapse or other unhealthy coping mechanisms. Some ideas to help children feel connected when apart may include bringing family photos or a comfort or transitional object and reminding their child that they love them and they are always thinking of them. We can help our participants think about how this may look for them, what feels true to their own parenting style, and their child’s own preferences and self-soothing practices.

How to practice self-care

Lastly, we want to give our participants extra support and care during this period of separation by encouraging them to be gentle with themselves and patient with their children. We can empower our participants to advocate for themselves and also help them to adjust their expectations as needed. Most importantly, we want to make sure they have whatever supports and self-care practices in place to carry them through this experience. We know that this can be a challenging time for maintaining one’s recovery, as well as mental and physical health. We want to encourage our participants to ask for help and to take care of themselves, all the while supporting them in meeting the many demands that are often asked of them in the reunification process.

- Sophia Terry, LCSW,
Program Specialist and Parent/Child Clinician

UPCOMING TRAININGS AND EVENTS

FIRST Steps Together Trainings:

In Person Training in Worcester

- 3/24 Family Recovery Support Specialist Day
- 5/5 All Staff FIRST Steps Together Training

Learning Community Calls, Tuesdays at 9:30 via zoom

- 3/3 Supervisor and Clinician Call
- 3/17 Learning Collaborative



The [Bureau of Substance Addiction Services](#) and [AdCare](#) have multiple trainings coming up that may be of interest. Please find their calendar [here](#).

- 3/6 [Boston Area Fathers and Family Network: One Father's Experience, "My Reward, My Punishment, My Son"](#) Boston, [The Children's Trust](#)
- 3/9 [Annual 2020 Breastfeeding Conference](#), Boxboro, [Boston Association for Childbirth Education and Nursing Mothers' Council](#)
- 3/18-20 [21st Annual New England Fathering Conference](#), Newport, Rhode Island, [New England Fathering Conference Planning Committee](#)
- 3/18 [De-mystifying Medications for Addictions Treatment for Peer Supports and Community Advocates](#), Holyoke, [Boston Medical Center Grayken Center for Addiction](#)
- 3/26 [Integrating Tobacco and Nicotine Issues into Group Treatment: Making Connections](#), Worcester, [Bureau of Substance Addiction Services](#)
- 4/2 [Understanding DCF and the Child Welfare Lens: For Professionals in the Community](#), Westborough, [Bureau of Substance Addiction Services](#)
- 4/6 [NeoQIC Eat, Sleep, Console Training Workshop: April 2020](#), Waltham, [The Neonatal Quality Improvement Collaborative of Massachusetts](#)
- 4/9-10 [SOS Innovations in Recovery Conference 2020](#), Hampton Beach, NH, [SOS Recovery Community Organization](#)
- 4/16 [Women Recover Conference](#), Norwood, [Bureau of Substance Addiction Services](#)
- 4/18 [2nd Annual Conference on Trauma and Embodiment](#), Cambridge, [Justice Resource Institute](#)
- 4/29 [Understanding Bias: White Fragility and How to Overcome It at Work](#), Natick, [Wayside Youth & Family Support Network](#)
- 5/8 [Beyond NAS 2020](#), Plymouth, [To the Moon and Back](#)
- 5/13 [Improving the Care of Mothers, Infants and Families Impacted by Perinatal Opioid Use: A Massachusetts Statewide Initiative](#), Norwood, [Perinatal-Neonatal Quality Improvement Network of Massachusetts \(PNQIN\)](#)
- 6/2 [Partners in Perinatal Health 31st Annual Conference](#), Norwood, [Department of Public Health](#)

For more information: [Maureen Whitman at MWhitman@JFCSBoston.org](mailto:MaureenWhitman@JFCSBoston.org)

FIRST (Families in Recovery Support) Steps Together



Caring for Generations
JF&CS
Jewish Family & Children's Service

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