

YOUTH LAW CENTER
GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN IN CHILD WELFARE

1. **LIFE LONG CONSEQUENCES** - A young child's early experience with the child welfare system has life-long cognitive, social, emotional and biological consequences.
2. **ONE CAREGIVER** - Infants and young children in the child welfare system biologically and emotionally need a stable, secure relationship with one caregiver.
3. **UNDERSTANDING SIGNALS** - Infants who have experienced maltreatment and early disruptions in care tend to do the opposite of what they need and push caregivers away. Caregivers need support in re-interpreting infants' signals.
4. **GRIEF** - Infants who are separated from their primary caregiver grieve the loss of their caregiver. Infants may grieve by crying or interacting less, but their hormones reflect the stress and trauma they are experiencing.
5. **VULNERABILITY** - Young children in foster care are especially vulnerable, due to combined effects of maltreatment, relationship disruption, and caregiver transitions.
6. **CAREGIVER ABSENCE** - The absence of a responsive, supportive caregiver is likely to have the greatest long-term consequences for a child (not the events they have experienced). The absence of a responsive caregiver leaves children ill-prepared to deal with stressors, unable to regulate behavior and physiology and may place them at risk for psychiatric disorders.
7. **DISRUPTING RELATIONSHIP** - Disruption of a child's primary attachment relationship has significant deleterious consequences. Child welfare should minimize or eliminate attachment relationship disruptions by maintaining children in home when possible, immediately placing babies in homes that are potentially permanent or could provide lifetime relationships, and avoiding frequent caregiver transitions.
8. **CAREGIVER INVESTMENT** - Caregivers of children who have experienced trauma must be nurturing, consistent, responsive and have a high level of psychological commitment and investment to the child. Kin caregivers and caregivers who have fostered a smaller number of children show the greatest commitment and investment to the children in their care. Higher levels of investment are linked with more supportive and nurturing interactions.
9. **CAREGIVER BEHAVIOR** - In order to protect young children adequately, the foster parent must become primary caregiver and primary attachment figure for child. The *quality* of the relationship forms the basis for the young child's sense of self, feelings of worthiness, and trust in others.
10. **ATTACHMENT AS RELATIONSHIP** - Adults are capable of sustaining attachment relationships across time and space if child welfare system facilitates and sets expectations (visitation, foster parents remaining involved after reunification, etc.).

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VISITATION PRINCIPLES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN IN CHILD WELFARE

1. **REDUCE SEPARATION STRESS** - If child is more than 6 months old, he or she must have an attachment figure present during visitation to avoid undue stress on the child from separation (most often this will be the foster parent).
2. **INVOLVE CAREGIVER** - Presence of foster parent can improve quality of visit for biological parent if bio parent understands rationale and can be supported, if foster parent can support child without undermining bio parent, and if child can tolerate the stress.
3. **CHILD WELL-BEING DICTATES** - Adults should bear the burden of difficulties in visitation – not young children. The child’s well-being should dictate who visits whom, the travel and familiarity of setting, and frequency of visits.
4. **INDIVIDUALIZED PLANNING** - Visitation planning must be individualized to needs and specific situation of child. Visitation plans should be revised during different phases and will have different meanings over time (e.g., evaluation opportunities vs. developing and practicing new skills vs. developing attachment for reunification.)
5. **DIFFERENT STAGES** - As parents progress towards reunification, frequency and length of visits should increase.
6. **FREQUENT AND CONSISTENT** - Visits must be frequent and consistent and based on a child’s sense of time.
7. **PARENT OPPORTUNITIES** - Visits should give parents the opportunity to participate in caregiving routines and day-to-day activities, to learn to respond to infant/young child needs instead of miscues, and to learn to effectively respond to challenging behaviors and developmental needs.
8. **MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIP**- Goal of visits is to sustain child’s relationship with parent. Child welfare staff should ensure visits include activities and efforts to build relationship and attachment.
9. **FACILITATING TRANSITION** - If child is reunified, foster parent should work closely with the family to facilitate transition and avoid re-creation of abandonment for child.
10. **HONORING RELATIONSHIPS** - A child’s relationship with foster parents should continue after reunification whenever possible. Creating system where the foster parent has the option to remain part of the child’s life after reunification enhances foster parent investment AND may assist in recruitment of new foster parent families.