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CENTER FOR STATES

# Quality Worker-Parent Visits: A Tip Sheet for Supervisors and Managers

Quality worker-parent<sup>1</sup> visits set a foundation for achieving child welfare outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being. These home visits provide caseworkers with critical opportunities to engage parents, build relationships, conduct ongoing safety assessments, and determine needed supports (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2006). Quality worker-parent visits, however, do not happen by chance. Child welfare staff need to thoughtfully plan, purposefully conduct, and accurately document visits to support the family's successful achievement of case goals and to hold both parents and the child welfare agency accountable to those goals. Supervisors and managers play an important role in supporting caseworkers in implementing quality contacts and in building needed engagement and critical thinking skills.

## **Quality Matters: Improving Caseworker Contacts With Children, Youth, and Families**

"Quality Worker-Parent Visits: A Tip Sheet for Supervisors and Managers" is part of a larger suite of products addressing quality contacts in child welfare. As defined by the Capacity Building Center for States (2017), quality contacts are "purposeful interactions that reflect engagement and contribute to assessment and case planning processes. These face-to-face interactions often are referred to as 'home visits' or 'caseworker visits'" (p.1).

Access "Defining Quality Contacts" and other related resources at  
<https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/quality-matters>

## Tip Sheet Purpose and Overview

The Center for States designed this tip sheet to help child welfare supervisors and managers build capacity for quality worker-parent visits, one subset of quality contacts. These visits include contacts with birth parents and other caregivers who receive in-home child welfare services as well as parents with children in out-of-home care. While new supervisors may find the information particularly useful, more experienced supervisors also may find it helpful as a tool to guide conversations with workers in their units. In addition, the tip sheet can support managers in working with supervisors to improve quality contacts and in thinking about related policy, program, and training needs.

The tip sheet provides guidance to support caseworkers through three phases of quality contacts:

- Before the visit (planning and preparation)
- During the visit (engagement, assessment, exploration, and adjustment)
- After the visit (documentation, debriefing, and follow-up)

For each of these phases, the tip sheet presents core considerations, expected caseworker activities, recommendations for what a supervisor can do to support the worker in conducting those activities, questions to ask, and red flags that may alert supervisors and managers to issues to address.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this tip sheet, the term "parent" refers to birth parents and other primary caregivers, which may include legal guardians, kin caregivers, or adoptive parents.

Take into account that many different variables, including, but not limited to, caseloads, workloads, and available resources, may affect caseworker and supervisor activities supporting quality contacts. Supervisors are not expected to provide every support or ask every question listed in this tip sheet for each visit conducted, but rather to choose those actions that seem most appropriate to the given circumstances. In addition, this tip sheet features quality indicators of caseworker visits to help guide identification of strengths, as well as developmental needs, at individual and program levels.

## Before the Visit

Planning and preparation before the visit support purposeful contacts tailored to the family's specific circumstances.

### Core Considerations and Key Caseworker Activities

Quality contacts start with the end in mind. Core considerations at this stage include:

- **Desired outcomes and case closure criteria:** Quality contacts, including caseworker visits with parents, should be grounded in well-defined case outcomes and case closure criteria (National Resource Center for In-Home Services, 2015). These criteria relate to the conditions (e.g., behaviors, protective capacities, court requirements) that need to occur or that the family needs to consistently demonstrate for the agency to have confidence in child safety.
- **Clear focus:** Each visit should have a defined purpose and agenda. Visits that lack purpose and preparation can be unproductive for the caseworker and uncomfortable for parents (Institute for Human Services, 2011). By including parents in the agenda planning process, caseworkers demonstrate respect and encourage ongoing engagement during the visit.
- **Safety:** To prepare for a visit, workers should become familiar with the case and the neighborhood and plan for worker safety and family safety (Pope & Hadden, 2011). Research on the prevalence of violence toward child welfare workers on visits is limited. In one literature review, authors concluded that while physical assaults are relatively rare, verbal aggression and threats are common (Robson, Cossar, & Quayle, 2014). Given the potential for violence and its harmful impact, supervisors should actively support staff in preventing violence and provide an environment to build resilience when it does occur. Supervisors can assist caseworkers in reviewing files to consider family history of violence and potential threats to the worker or family members. Supervisors can help make decisions on the location of the first visit or whether a colleague (or law enforcement officer) should accompany the worker on the visit. Supervisors should have clear procedures in place to make sure they are informed of the schedule and location of visits. In addition, supervisors can remind workers to remain observant, trust their instincts, think ahead about safe entry and exit routes, and maintain working cell phones and cars (Salus, 2004). Supervisors should also make a plan to update information on risk to the worker and family as the case continues.

Exhibit 1 summarizes quality indicators and characteristics that supervisors can look for when reviewing caseworker activities before the visit. (Note: Supervisors can discuss these with caseworkers using the "Quality Contact Casework Activities Worksheet" available on the "Quality Matters" webpage).

## Exhibit 1. Quality Indicators Before the Visit

### Caseworker activities before the visit reflect:

#### Scheduling

- ☐ Visit frequency and location align with national and state policy requirements and case circumstances.
- ☐ Visit timing accommodates parents' and other family members' schedules.
- ☐ Length and location of visits foster open and honest conversations.

#### Information gathering and review

- ☐ Case documents, service plans, and related data and information have been gathered and reviewed.
- ☐ Collateral contacts made with key individuals in the case (e.g., therapist, treatment provider, doctor, school personnel) facilitate assessment of progress and concerns.

#### Planning and preparation

- ☐ Purpose and agenda for the visit demonstrate clarity and consistency with outcomes and case closure criteria.
- ☐ Purpose and agenda for the visit include parent concerns or priorities.
- ☐ Key issues and concerns to explore have been identified.
- ☐ A plan for worker and family safety is in place.



### What a Supervisor Can Do To Support Workers Before Visits

Supervisors can support caseworkers individually and collectively to plan and prepare for visits through the following activities:

- ☐ Communicate agency policies for the frequency, location, and quality of visits and the reasons for them.
- ☐ Ensure staff have adequate planning time, explore barriers to planning, and identify strategies to address barriers.
- ☐ Provide caseworkers with guidance on linking information and observations gained during home visits to clear case objectives and case closure criteria.
- ☐ Model expected behaviors during meetings with caseworkers by setting a clear purpose and agenda for the meeting, using active listening, and identifying caseworker strengths.
- ☐ Assess caseworker capacity and address learning needs related to setting agendas, planning for child safety and risk assessments, promoting family engagement, employing culturally responsive practices, and ensuring worker and family safety during home visits.
- ☐ Support staff in identifying family strengths and ways to partner with parents.
- ☐ Encourage staff to express concerns and talk through plans for upcoming visits.
- ☐ Work with staff to reframe concerns and view situations from a more positive or empowering perspective.
- ☐ Role play difficult conversations.



### Questions to Ask Caseworkers

Supervisors can help guide caseworkers during the planning phase with questions such as:

- What is the purpose of this visit? How do the purpose and agenda fit with the family's case goals?
- What documents and information have you reviewed, and what collateral contacts have you made? What do they tell you about child safety? About the family's progress toward goals?
- What services or supports does the family need and which ones may no longer be necessary?
- Does the current assessment have any "gray areas" for which you need more information to determine appropriate services or supports? If so, how do you plan to gather more information?
- What strategies do you plan to use to engage, support, and encourage the parent(s)?

- What have you learned about how to partner effectively with the parent(s)?
- What are the strengths of the family and how can they be leveraged to enhance family progress?
- What concerns do you have about this visit?
- What difficult conversations do you anticipate and how do you plan to address them?
- Are there cultural issues to consider?
- Do you have concerns for your safety related to this visit?



### Potential Red Flags

The following indicators may suggest that workers need additional support (Institute for Human Services, 2011):

- Caseworkers or family members appear to avoid home visits.
- Visits consistently reflect a lack of preparation and focus.

## During the Visit

Caseworker visits are essential to building relationships with families, ensuring child, youth, and family safety, and making case planning decisions.

### Core Considerations and Key Caseworker Activities

Core considerations for a quality visit and areas in which caseworkers may need supervisory support or skill building include:

- **Parent engagement:** Engagement is an essential part of partnering with parents in the change process, which, in turn, contributes to more positive outcomes for families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014; Gladstone et al., 2014). Parental engagement can be challenging given the intense emotions of parents in response to child welfare involvement, challenges related to co-occurring issues (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness, family stressors), and reactions to the power differential created by the agency's authority (Marcenko, Brown, DeVoy, & Conway, 2010). Researchers have identified three key worker actions as particularly relevant to engagement (Gladstone et al., 2014):
  - Including parents as partners in planning
  - Demonstrating care and support
  - Praising parents for their efforts, ideas, or achievements
- **Relationship building:** Relationship building is an essential part of parent engagement. Important building blocks of the worker-parent relationship include (National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, 2005/2008):
  - Genuineness (being real)
  - Empathy (communicating understanding)
  - Respect (suspending critical judgment)
- **Assessment:** Caseworkers need to assess child safety and risk at each visit. When children live in the home, caseworkers must continually evaluate the household for the presence of danger indicators—caregiver behaviors or conditions that represent an immediate danger of serious harm to the child (National Resource Center for In-Home Services, 2015). For children in out-of-home care, caseworkers should continue to hold visits in the parents' home and must consider whether those children can safely return to the home. In addition, workers should assess child and family functioning and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For more information on conducting assessments, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/assessment/family-assess/>

- **Case planning:** Visits provide caseworkers with important opportunities for collecting and providing information on case plans, ensuring that services match family needs, and developing or affirming behavior-based objectives. During a quality contact, caseworkers engage parents to discuss their co-created case plan, progress against goals, and issues they need to address.

Exhibit 2 summarizes quality indicators and characteristics of caseworker visits, which supervisors can use to review visits with caseworkers.

## Exhibit 2. Quality Indicators During the Visit

### Caseworker activities during the visit reflect:

#### Engagement and collaboration

- ☐ Parents reviewed the purpose and agenda for the visit with the caseworker, and their input was requested and incorporated (as appropriate).
- ☐ Caseworker demonstrated genuineness, empathy, and respect for each family member.
- ☐ Parents were encouraged to be active participants in the visit.
- ☐ Caseworker interactions displayed minimal bias and judgment.
- ☐ Discussion explored achievements, challenges, and needs.
- ☐ Private conversations were conducted with adults and children or youth.

#### Case planning

- ☐ Child safety and risk assessments were updated.
- ☐ Assessments of child and family functioning and well-being were updated.
- ☐ Case goals and progress toward goals were reviewed.
- ☐ Strengths and opportunities for the family were identified.
- ☐ Discussions addressed concerns, changing circumstances, and challenges.
- ☐ Observations were made related to the home and interactions among family members.
- ☐ Services and supports for the family were identified.
- ☐ Expectations of the family were communicated.
- ☐ The case plan was updated, as needed.

#### Wrap up

- ☐ A summary provided at the end of the visit included key discussion points and next steps.
- ☐ Parent's input was requested for agenda items for the next visit.
- ☐ Arrangements were made for the next visit.



### What a Supervisor Can Do to Support Workers in Conducting Visits

Supervisors can support workers in implementing effective visits with parents through the following activities:

- ☐ Accompany staff on selected visits and provide feedback on strengths and areas for development based on observations.
- ☐ Ensure caseworkers are trained and demonstrate competency in assessing for safety, risk, permanency, and well-being.
- ☐ Encourage staff (in one-on-one or group supervision) to discuss their strengths and challenges with engaging families, building relationships during visits, holding difficult conversations, and handling distractions during visits.
- ☐ Discuss opportunities for the workers to engage parents through small talk, sharing appropriate information, demonstrating respect, and showing sensitivity to the family's culture.
- ☐ Role play difficult situations.

- ☐ Offer guidance and strategies for using an agenda to guide the visit, reviewing progress against case plans, responding to emerging issues, and wrapping up visit with a summary and next steps.
- ☐ Provide staff with information on available community services and informal supports that can support families in their caseloads.

Questions for supervisors to ask caseworkers about conducting visits appear below in “After the Visit.”



### Potential Red Flags

The following indicators may suggest that workers need additional guidance and support (Institute for Human Services, 2011):

- Patterns of extremely short caseworker visits (which may suggest avoidance) or extremely long visits (which may suggest difficulties setting boundaries)
- Case visit reports that all sound the same (which may indicate that workers are not tailoring visits to each family’s circumstances and needs)
- Case visit reports that focus only on negative aspects of the family or visit (which may suggest a need for building caseworker skills in strength-based approaches)

## After the Visit

A quality contact is not complete when a caseworker leaves the home. Rather, it continues with documentation of the visit, debriefing with a supervisor, and caseworker follow-up on next steps.

### Core Considerations and Key Caseworker Activities

Core considerations following a caseworker-parent visit reflect:

- **Clear, objective documentation:** Child welfare staff need accurate documentation to track parents’ progress toward achieving case goals and their service and support needs. Accurate documentation sets a foundation for sound decision-making and future planning. In addition, if a case needs to be transferred from one worker to another, detailed documentation helps the new worker understand the family’s situation, what actions have been taken and why, and next steps. Documentation should be clear, concise, factual, and objective. Caseworkers should describe behaviors or interactions, avoid jargon, and stay away from negative or overused “buzzwords” (e.g., “The mother was hostile,” or “Parents were noncompliant”).<sup>3</sup>
- **Debriefing and reflection:** A debriefing of visits, as part of supervision, provides a valuable opportunity for:
  - Supervisors to learn more about case-specific progress, child safety, and actions needed
  - Supervisors to identify caseworker strengths and learning needs
  - Caseworkers to receive guidance and insights from discussing the experience and its outcomes
 Ideally, debriefings occur before the worker’s next contact with the family and may occur outside of regularly scheduled supervision.
- **Different supervisory needs:** Debriefing sessions can serve as opportunities for three different aspects of supervision (Institute for Human Services, 2015):
  - Administrative (to address compliance with agency requirements)
  - Educational (to address developmental needs and build critical thinking skills)
  - Supportive (to encourage workers and respond to their concerns)

Exhibit 3 summarizes quality indicators and characteristics for after the visit, which supervisors can use to review visits with caseworkers.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on buzzwords, see <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/child-protection/buzzwords/>

### Exhibit 3. Quality Indicators After the Visit

#### Caseworker activities after the visit reflect:

##### Documentation

- ☐ Documentation presents clear, concrete, and concise information, observations, and decisions.
- ☐ Documentation is nonjudgmental and avoids “buzzwords.”
- ☐ Documentation includes the following elements, as appropriate and in accordance with agency policies:
  - ☐ Participants
  - ☐ Date and location
  - ☐ Assessment of child safety and risk
  - ☐ Child or youth well-being (related to health, mental health, development, behavior, education, social activities, and relationships)
  - ☐ Progress toward case goals and any changes to case plan or tasks
  - ☐ Concerns expressed by the child, youth, parent, or resource parent
  - ☐ Observations on the home environment and interactions
  - ☐ Additional service needs
  - ☐ Cultural considerations
  - ☐ Follow-up activities and priorities
- ☐ Summary of actions needed includes the person responsible and target dates.

##### Debriefing

- ☐ Meeting with supervisor involved discussion of visit, child safety concerns, and key directions.
- ☐ Caseworker reflected on successful approaches during visits, challenges experienced, and areas for development in conducting quality contacts.

##### Follow-up

- ☐ Caseworker followed up on commitments made and next steps.



### What a Supervisor Can Do to Support Workers After Visits

- ☐ Ensure workers are familiar with agency policies and practices for documenting visits.
- ☐ Remind workers to write notes as soon as possible after the visit. Share examples of good documentation and discuss desired length, level of detail, style, and essential elements.
- ☐ Review worker documentation of visits, ensure that it includes objective support for decisions, and provide feedback on content, clarity, and language (including jargon or biases).
- ☐ Prepare a standard checklist of expectations for a home visit as a tool for debriefing sessions.<sup>4</sup> This could be co-created in unit meetings with staff, along with discussions about expectations.
- ☐ Discuss one or more visits in depth with workers to collaboratively identify caseworker strengths, difficulties experienced, alternate approaches, and lessons learned.
- ☐ Monitor the frequency and quality of worker visits and worker documentation against agency requirements. Identify and address related barriers and issues.
- ☐ Identify staff learning needs and arrange for training and other learning opportunities. (For information about “Quality Matters” learning resources, visit <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/quality-matters/>)

<sup>4</sup> Supervisors can use or adapt the “Quality Contact Casework Activities Worksheet” available at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/quality-matters/>. Supervisors can find another sample checklist used in Ohio at <http://www.ocwtp.net/PDFs/Trainee%20Resources/SU%20Core/Case%20Conferences.pdf>





## Questions to Ask Caseworkers

During a supervisory conference or debriefing session, supervisors can ask caseworkers questions about individual visits, including:

- What was the purpose of your recent visit and did you achieve it?
- What engagement strategies did you use?
- What worked well in engagement, and what would you do differently next time?
- What is the parent doing that indicates progress in providing a safe environment for the child?
- What did you learn about child safety threats, vulnerabilities, and family protective capacities during your assessment? If you identified present or imminent safety threats, what did you do to address them?
- What did you learn about the parent's and child's well-being?
- What observations did you make about the home environment and family interactions?
- What did you learn about the family's progress toward achieving goals identified in the case plan? What barriers exist?
- What services or supports does the family need?
- How did you work together with the parent to find solutions to current issues and needs?
- What changes (if any) are required to case goals and plans?
- What next steps did you discuss with the parent? What follow-up actions have you taken?

In addition, supervisors can prompt caseworkers' reflection on their strengths, challenges, and lessons learned in conducting and documenting worker-parent visits.



## Potential Red Flags

The following indicators may suggest that workers need additional guidance and support (Institute for Human Services, 2011):

- Documentation appears the same for all family visits.
- Documentation is missing critical information or lacks depth.
- Documentation has too much information and/or irrelevant information.
- Caseworkers avoid supervisory conferences or only discuss visits in a superficial manner.

Other red flags include:

- Documentation has negative or overused buzzwords to characterize the parent rather than a description of behaviors or interactions.
- Documentation of the visit reflects indications of risk not shared with the supervisor.
- Discussions indicate that interactions with a family trigger a worker's trauma experiences or other personal issues, which may affect worker objectivity.

## Conclusion

Supervisors and managers can play essential roles in building the capacity of caseworkers to conduct quality visits with parents. Advancing knowledge and skills in this area requires a combination of guidance on expectations, staff training, monitoring, coaching, reflection, and ongoing support. Working in partnership with staff around quality contacts helps to increase their knowledge and insight and also models engaging approaches for caseworkers to use in their work in partnership with parents.

To learn more about quality contacts and related Center for States publications and learning tools, visit the **Quality Matters: Improving Caseworker Contacts With Children, Youth, and Families** webpage at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/quality-matters>



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