



# Working with Birth Parents: Visitation

## Syllabus

### Introduction

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Expert – Charley Joyce, LICSW, Clinical Director of PATH Inc. of North Dakota.

Mr. Joyce and four foster families explore problems and solutions relating to birth parent visits—before, during, and after the visits—and take a look at how to cope with a missed visit.

### What to Expect: Before the Visit

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The time leading up to the visit is called the pre-visit. In the pre-visit phase, youth struggle with being able to identify and speak out about their emotions. Instead, their feelings are often acted out through their behavior.

### What to Expect: During and After

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During the visit phase, the youth can display a range of emotions. The youth's response in the visit is partially dependent on the relationship they have with their birth parent. The situation is emotionally complex for them, with a mixture of happiness and confusion.

### Daniel

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Latonya and Deon talk about their 8-year-old foster son, Daniel, who often displays immature and regressive behavior before and after visits with his birth parents. It's somewhat normal for a child to have a degree of stress related to the visits. Often, a stressed foster child can comfort himself or relieve anxiety by regressing to previous, immature behaviors. For younger ones, it might be bed-wetting or thumb-sucking. For older foster youth, it can be represented through increased moodiness, defiance, or acting-out behavior.

### Jill

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Betty talks about her 12-year-old foster daughter, Jill, who demonstrates similar behavior to Daniel's before and after visits. Betty hasn't talked with Jill about how she feels about the visits. However, talking it out is helpful and important. Parents can help the youth cope with the stress of the visit by focusing upon reassurance and preparation.

### Safety Measures

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Foster parents can handle safety problems prior to visits by discussing safety measures with the child's caseworker. It's important to keep a positive relationship with the caseworker, so that the foster parent can exchange information in a way that will be heard. Above all, safety measures in visits should be clearly identified for the child.



## Improve Visitation

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To improve the visitation, when necessary, it is important that the parents talk with the child welfare worker about ways that can help a foster youth feel secure in the visitation process. Many things can be done to create a positive interaction between the child and their parent, therefore reducing the anxiety of the child. Any pre-planning that assists with the site being safe, predictable, and comfortable will help diminish anxiety in the youth.

## Cancel and No-Shows

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Emilio talks about his 16-year-old foster son, Tony, who shuts down when his birth mother doesn't show up for visits. It is very difficult for the foster child and the foster parent when a visit is cancelled, or parents fail to show up. A parent can help their child through such a problem by recognizing that foster parents don't seem to have any control over the birth parent's follow-through. It is very important that the youth's custodian be brought into these types of situations. Custodians can often identify issues that cause birth parents not to follow through with visits. When it comes to the bottom line, the child suffers with inconsistent visits.

## Coping with Frustration

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When visits are cancelled or the birth parents are no-shows, it's important for foster parents to use their support systems to confidentially discuss their frustrations. They should try not to show or talk about their frustrations in hearing range of the foster child or other children.

## Reassurance

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If foster parents believe the birth parents do not really want the child back and this is the reason for the no-show behavior, they should talk with their support people. Foster parents can clarify their role regarding the visitations and the birth parents by discussing this with their support team.

## After the Visit

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Maria talks about her 11-year-old foster daughter, Lucila, who doesn't seem to get upset before or during the visit but after the visit pulls away from her foster family. Some foster youth will crave the foster parent's attention after a visit; other children will behave in ways that distance themselves from the foster parent after a visit. Parents should try to learn what the foster youth needs after a visit to help them transition back to the foster home.

## Final Remarks

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It is important to remember that all of these behavioral/emotional changes represent the stress that the child feels about the visit. The youth's acting out may increase when there is talk of restarting visits, increasing visits, or transitioning home. If foster parents and birth families can work together, it can be very beneficial for the foster youth.

## Course Concludes

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