

Excerpted from a September 2006 publication of the National Conference of State Legislatures, entitled Child Welfare Caseworker Visits with Children and Parents

<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/caseworkervisits.htm>

Quality Caseworker Visits

So what comprises a quality caseworker visit? There certainly are key elements that quality visits should include. For example, they should be:

- Scheduled to meet suggested national or prescribed state standards and the needs of children and families.
- Primarily held in the family home (biological and foster) and at times convenient for children and both biological and foster parents.
- Planned in advance of the visit, with issues noted for exploration and goals established for the time spent together.
- Open enough to offer opportunities for meaningful consultation with and by children and parents.
- Individualized; for example, providing separate time for discussions with children and parents. This provides the opportunity to privately share their experiences and concerns and to ensure that domestic violence or other issues that might not be disclosed when other family members are present are identified and addressed, as needed.
- Focused on the child and family's case plan and the completion of actions necessary to support children and families in achieving the goals established in their plans.
- Exploratory in nature, examining changes in the child's or family's circumstances on an ongoing basis.
- Supportive and skill-generating, so that children and families feel safe in dealing with challenges and change and have the tools to take advantage of new opportunities.

Although these and other caseworker visit practices are important, the overall focus of the visits is most important. For caseworker visits to be successful, the focus should shift from examining only the performance of families (for example, did the parent attend the substance abuse treatment offered?) to assessing both the

performance of the agency and caseworker (for example, did the agency ensure that the treatment matched the needs, age and gender of the intended recipient and was available at a time and location appropriate to their schedule?) and how well the family is functioning relative to the support and services provided by the agency.

This fundamental shift in perspective promotes caseworker engagement in a continuous quality improvement loop similar to that which most child welfare agencies are now implementing. Their goals for a visit with a family are casework goals and goals related to a family's progress. Moreover, child welfare agencies should monitor the link between the achievement of the caseworker's goals and the achievement of family goals. When assessing a visit, caseworkers might ask the following general questions (as well as others specific to the family visited):

- Did I spend sufficient time planning the visit, did I meet the goals established for the visit, and what were the positive outcomes for the family associated with meeting my goals?
- What worked well during this visit, and how might I share my successful approaches with other agency staff? How will I track patterns in the success of specific approaches so that I might report those to my supervisor for possible incorporation into the agency's case practice procedures?
- What types of challenges did I experience during the visit and how might I have addressed those better? Are there specific areas in which I need additional guidance or training?
- What did I learn through the visit that needs to be addressed (family needs/goals and caseworker performance goals)?

Each question is designed to create a new level of self-examination among caseworkers—a continuous quality examination that will lead to improvements in individual caseworker and agency performance. Legislators can support state child welfare agency administrators in creating this shift in perspective and operation through the analysis of overarching child welfare system successes and challenges.