

General Information

Welcome to the Whistle Stop, a Supervised Visitation and Exchange Center. We serve children and their parents in Southwest Louisiana. We believe that children have a right to know both parents, regardless of their parents' relationship, and that they benefit from regular contact with their non-custodial parent(s).

The Whistle Stop provides a safe and secure place for family visits. Family rooms are comfortable with a home-like atmosphere, conducive to quality parent-child interaction. The center also serves as a neutral ground for the safe exchange of children from one parent to another.

Our clients come from different social, economic, educational and philosophical backgrounds and are of different ethnic origins. They are referred to the Whistle Stop by Family Court, Children's Services, Counselors, Mediation and some voluntarily self refer.

Families use the Whistle Stop for a variety of reasons. Some parents are involved in intense custody litigation where various kinds of allegations have been made. These non-custodial parents have interim visits at the Whistle Stop until their court case is resolved and a more permanent visitation plan is put in place. Other parents use our service because they suffer from mental health or substance abuse problems or the parents have domestic violence issues.

We also serve children in foster care. The State's initial goal for resolving these cases is usually family reunification. This goal includes a visitation contract with the parents.

It is important to recognize that children in these circumstances have lost the most important persons(s) in their life, Mom, Dad or both. Some have also lost contact with siblings, their home, clothes, toys, friends, school, basically, everything they have. As a result of this loss, children are often depressed, they may blame themselves and feel guilty. They feel abandoned and helpless. They feel unsure and uncertain about their future and custodial parents, caseworkers and those involved in the case, do not always understand this loss. From their perspective, the child has been removed from a bad environment and are better off. The focus is **not** on what has been lost– but on “what has been gained.”

Visits Matter

Regardless of the family's circumstances, *Visits Matter*. They help maintain relationships within the family, empower visiting parents to face reality, and give them an opportunity to learn and practice new skills and behaviors. Visits also help children express their feelings and calm their separation fears.

Most importantly, *Visits Matter* because, for foster children, continued contact with parents increases the probability that children will go home to their families. For these families, *visits* have been called the “*heart of reunification*.”

For children involved in custody litigation, *visits* give parents a chance to demonstrate effective parenting skills by setting limits, by disciplining children in appropriate, non-violent ways, paying attention to their needs and spending quality time with them. *Visits* often solidify

parent-child trust and bonding and promotes emotional stability for the child. These parents are more likely to move on to a normal, unsupervised visitation plan.

Children who do not maintain contact with their non-custodial parent(s) are more likely to develop severe emotional, behavioral, or developmental problems. They are more likely to exhibit severe disturbances in relationships with caregivers. They are more likely to experience psychiatric emergencies as well as physical health problems.

Making the Most of Visits

The Whistle Stop staff takes a pro-active approach to facilitating quality family visits. We encourage parents to play with their children, to talk politely with them, to enjoy their children's company, and to read to them. We also encourage parents to separate from the visit, their frustration, shame and humiliation over losing custody.

It is not enough to provide a family with an empty room in which to meet. The Whistle Stop has six playrooms, all with a home-like atmosphere. They have comfortable furniture and are equipped with video game systems and a large selection of age appropriate toys, games, and books. We have board games, remote control cars, art supplies, construction systems, dolls and doll houses, dart boards, basketball goals, trains, a smart horse named "Butterscotch" and elephants to ride, a smart cycle, musical keyboards, and educational toys to challenge young minds.

We also provide soft drinks, juice and bottled water and encourage parents to bring meals or snacks to share with their children. The staff works to tailor visits to the interests of children and parents. Promoting activities of common interest facilitates positive interactions.

Documenting Visits

Regardless of how visits go, it is important to document family activities. Accurate and descriptive documentation of visitation patterns and progress serves to provide clear evidence for reunification or development of an unsupervised visitation plan.

Documentation includes:

- *Who participated in the visit;
- *Time the parent arrived and length of the visit;
- *Interactions between the participants (levels of affection);
- *The extent to which the parent exercised his or her role (setting limits, interaction, etc.);
- *Interventions by the staff;
- *How the parent and child separated.

At orientation, parents sign a Release of Information so that copies of Observations Reports can be made available to caseworkers, the parties to the case, attorneys, judges or counselors involved in the case.

When properly planned, facilitated, and documented, frequent visits between children and their parents can be positive experiences that result in equally positive outcomes. *Visits really do matter,*

