

The logo consists of three horizontal white bars of decreasing length, stacked vertically, to the left of the text.

Strong Starts Court Initiative

A PROGRAM OF THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE INNOVATION



Practice Guide: Tips from the Field

Supporting Parent-Child Visits for Young Children

For a child who has been removed from a parent or caregiver, parent-child visits can be stressful and dysregulating; for infants and toddlers, who cannot fully express themselves, these visits can be especially challenging. Because the first two years of a child's life are critical for forming attachment relationships, separation from a primary attachment figure or any rupture to the relationship, like witnessing violence in the home, can harm a child's development. Parents and caregivers act as a secure base for infants and very young children, and as a regulator for a child's stress response system such that a child's ability to function under stress is dependent upon the presence of their primary caregiver. Thus, parent-child visits can be overwhelming and confusing for these young children since their primary source of security and regulation has been removed and visits create repeated reunions and separations. Supporting meaningful, positive parent-child visits is one way to lessen the harmful effects of attachment disruption on a child's development. Based on the discussions of multidisciplinary groups of child welfare professionals across six counties where Strong Starts operates, the following tip sheet has been created to best support parent-child visits. It's important to note that each child has a different relationship with their parent or caregiver so the suggestions provided should act as guideline and be adapted to the needs of each child and family.

Setting up for Success

Because family time is limited in nature, it's crucial that the quality of the time spent between the child and parent or caregiver is maximized. Intentionally preparing for parent-child visits is critical for success and creating a safe environment for everyone involved. When preparing for family time remember to:

Create time for a parent and resource parent to meet separately before the first visit: By nature of the situation, the initial dynamic between parent and resource parent or other caregivers can be fraught. By allowing space for a parent to discuss a child's needs, preferences, and tendencies with the resource caregiver, the transition for both the parent and the child can be made easier. Even if a child is with a kinship caregiver, who was previously known, it can be helpful to allow the caregivers a space to discuss and prepare for the new dynamic and any resulting expectations.

Set expectations for parents: For parents to be at their best during a visit, it is important to create conditions of psychological safety for the parent. Recognize that the removal of the child may have occurred quickly and been very confusing for the parent. If it was a traumatic experience, several recurring conversations may need to be held about the expectations for parents prior to and during visits since trauma can impact a person's ability to process information. Psychological safety for a parent can be promoted by timely and accurate information, specific guidance provided to the parent about what to expect, including the child's disposition the day of the visit, and how to create a good visit for both parent and child. Parent advocates are in a good position to provide this kind of information and support.

Intentionally consider who is bringing a child to and from parent-child visits: Recurring reunions and separations have a large emotional impact on very young children, so it is important to ensure that a child travels to and from each visit with someone who is a secure base for the child and can provide the soothing and reassurance that a young child needs in these circumstances. It is not good practice for a child to be brought to and from visits by an unfamiliar person.

Create Opportunities for Meaningful Parent-Child Visits

The environment and context of family time can largely influence its outcome. For both parent and child, it's important that conditions promote a feeling of psychological safety during family time so that they have the ability to connect with each other. If a child is dysregulated, it can be difficult for the child to engage with a parent, which may cause the parent to become frustrated that they cannot seem to interact positively with their child. Likewise, if a parent is upset, the child may sense this and become agitated and withdrawn. As much as possible:

Plan to hold the visit in natural settings: Have visits in a setting that is natural for both the parent and the child. This could be somewhere neutral in the community, in a resource parent's home, or in another trusted adult's space. It also supports psychological safety if parent and child are comfortable in their environment and do not feel perceived surveillance and judgment during supervised visits. This can put parents on edge and trigger their memories of systemic oppression or personal experiences of negative judgment. If parents are not comfortable in the resource parents' home, consider other options.

Establish routine and structure around family time: For children experiencing trauma, creating structure and routine is one way to mitigate the effects of certain triggers. Consistency of time and place can be especially helpful for young children.

Utilize people that are familiar to a parent and child: When needed parent child visits should be supervised by someone familiar with the parent and child and someone with whom they feel comfortable. Having consistency in time and place, but also of people involved, is an important way to create a safe space for more meaningful family time.

The Time in Between: Supporting Relationships Between Caregivers

Just as intentional planning is needed before each parent-child visit, intentional planning between visits is similarly essential. Infants and toddlers look for non-verbal signs of safety or danger and when adults are in high conflict, infants can be frightened or stressed. Additionally, conflict between caregivers during family time can not only affect the time that a child has with their caregiver but can also exacerbate the effects of the trauma of separation from a caregiver. If the child is placed in kinship foster care, all caregivers might already have relationships with each other, which can be complicated and tension may exist.

Gaining an understanding of the relationship between the parent and resource parent prior to their initial meeting to discuss the child will help you be prepared to discuss the concerns and challenges the parent might have regarding the resource parent. Recognize that it might take some time for all to be comfortable sharing these responsibilities. Improving relationships between parents and resource parents or other caregivers can remove barriers to family time while also promoting healing of a child's attachment relationships. A positive relationship between these important caregivers might open new options and possibilities for visits, help the resource parent appreciate the need for frequent visits, and importantly, set a good emotional climate for a visit. Supporting the relationship between caregivers is supporting the child and their development. Between visits remember to:

Facilitate regular communication between parents and resource parents: This could take the form of a journal kept between caregivers, phone calls, brief discussions before and after a visit, or anything else that will help to share information about the child's development, wellbeing, or other relevant milestones. Regular communication about the child also allows for a parent to come better prepared for parent-child visits and have the tools to be more engaging with their child.

Emphasize the importance of virtual contact in between visits: For very young children, a caregiver's involvement in daily activities is critical for a child's ability to form attachment relationships with them. Involving a parent in the morning or night time routine through a phone call or video chat is beneficial for the child's attachment relationship with the parent, and for children who have been out of their parent's care for an extended period of time, regular contact can allow a child to more comfortably interact with their parent during planned visits.

Ensure that all caregivers receive the needed support immediately after visits: The period before and after each visit can be difficult and emotionally overwhelming for all involved. Connecting parents with parent advocates or other trusted adults that they can talk with before or after a visit can be one way to alleviate some of the stress. It's also important to connect resource parents to their own supports whether that be with resource parents support groups or encouraging them to reach out to their natural support system.

Intimate Partner Violence Considerations

Infants and toddlers who are exposed to intimate partner violence are 95% more likely to be exposed to at least one other adverse childhood experience (ACE). Moreover, exposure to violence can affect children across several important domains, including social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and developmental. Supporting a healthy attachment with a primary caregiver with whom the child feels safe can help mitigate these negative effects and build protective factors. It is also important to consider the child's relationship with the person causing harm as an attachment disruption may have occurred if they were removed from the home and safe contact should be explored. The following tips should be considered when thinking about parent-child visits for infants and toddlers who have been exposed to intimate partner violence.

Support the child's relationship with the protective parent: For a child who has had exposure to intimate partner violence, parent-child visits can be a particularly stressful time. Separation from their primary caregiver can cause a child to feel agitation, anger, and fear. In the initial visits, they may be worried that they will not see their primary caregiver again or feel angry that the primary caregiver left them. Supporting the parent and strengthening the attachment relationship, including through dyadic interventions such as Child Parent Psychotherapy, is critical to building protective factors for children who have experienced intimate partner violence.

Assess how to support the child’s relationship with the parent causing harm

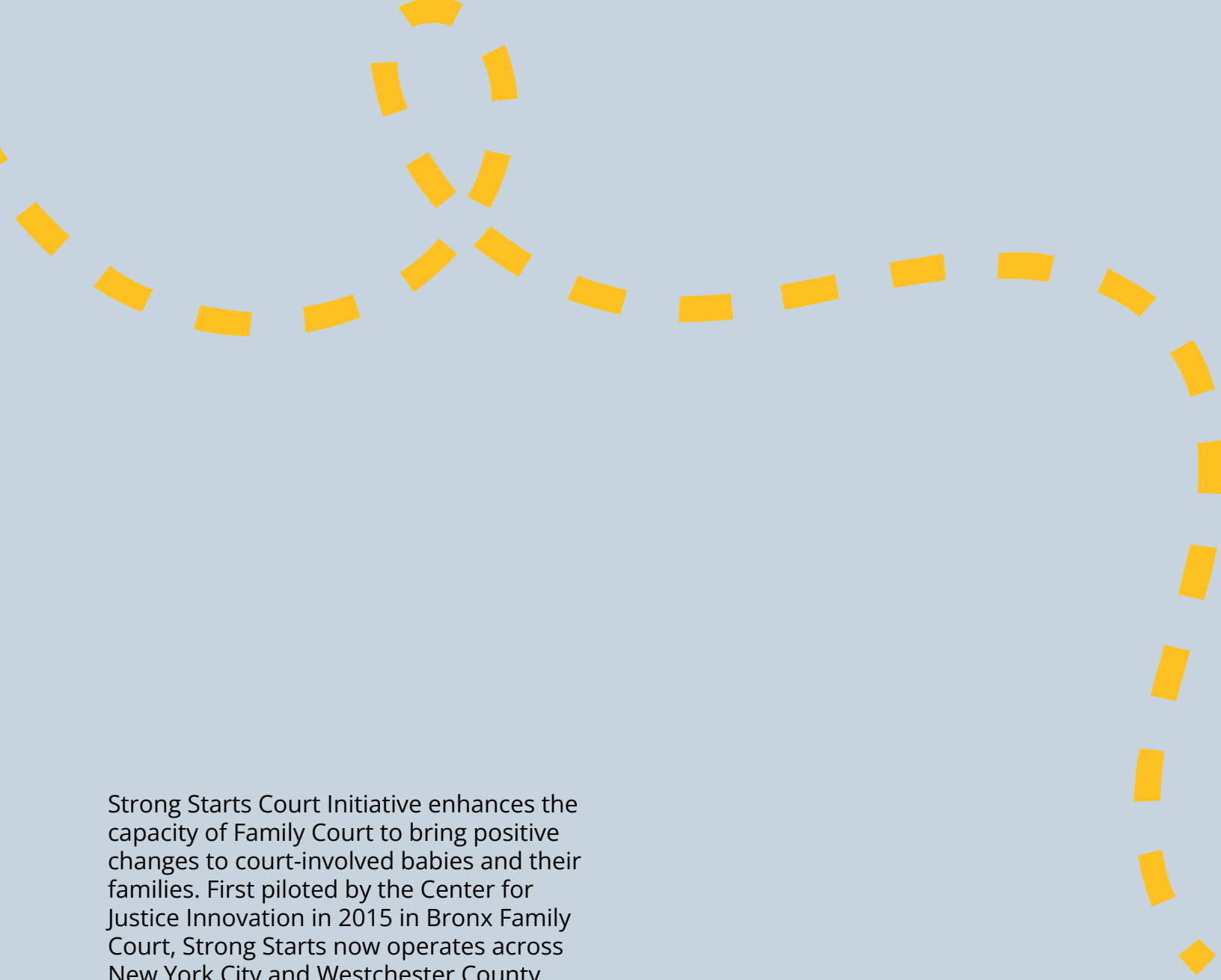
where possible: If the parent causing harm has been removed from the home due to intimate partner violence, this may represent a traumatic attachment disruption for the child as well. It is important to address this trauma, ideally with the support of therapeutic supervised visitation, where there is clinical support for that important relationship while protecting the emotional and physical safety of the child as well. Dyadic services to promote a safe relationship should be considered, as well as programs that support parenting after violence, such as Safe Way Forward.

Promote safety around visits for the parent and child who have experienced harm:

Allow space for the children to share their experiences of the visits since the parent causing harm might say things to the child that are upsetting or inappropriate. The child should have an outlet to address their experiences if that occurs. Visits between a child and a parent causing harm may present increased safety risks for the survivor parent. A parent causing harm may use the opportunity of the visit to cause further harm. Ensure visitation services account for the intimate partner violence dynamics in the individual relationship and safety plan accordingly. Protocols such as separate entrances and exits for drop off and pick up for the two parents can help the parent experiencing harm feel safer. The Safe and Together Institute also provides resources and technical assistance to implement survivor and child-centered practices in child welfare.

For further information, please view [Strong Starts’ training on supporting parent child visits with very young children](#). Additionally, see ACS’s P2P Policies and Procedures.

¹ Willheim, Erica. “Early Childhood Witnesses of Domestic Violence.” January 13, 2022.

A decorative yellow dashed line composed of short, thick segments, curving from the top left towards the right side of the page.

Strong Starts Court Initiative enhances the capacity of Family Court to bring positive changes to court-involved babies and their families. First piloted by the Center for Justice Innovation in 2015 in Bronx Family Court, Strong Starts now operates across New York City and Westchester County, bringing expertise in early child development to all stages of Family Court proceedings and supports infants, toddlers, caregivers, and families so that the court becomes a catalyst for positive change in the lives of the youngest children.

Strong Starts regularly convenes its stakeholders to discuss and strategize ways to improve practice for child welfare-involved families with very young children through county-based Steering Committee meetings. For more information on these meetings or project, visit the [Center's website](#) or reach out to strongstarts@innovatingjustice.org.

June 2024