

Reasons to Engage the Parent and Advocate for Contact/Visitation

1. Maintaining parental engagement and contact/visitation can help the child cope with the situation.

Separation leads to immediate and long-term effects. Initially the child experiences guilt, shame, abandonment, and the loss of financial support. Long-term it can lead to developmental delays, an inability to cope, and future stress and trauma. Studies indicate that visitation can help the child cope with the situation and lessen the trauma that the child experiences – improving the child’s overall well-being. Visitation helps normalize interactions and benefits children emotionally and behaviorally. It allows them to express and deal with their emotional reactions to the incarceration and separation from their parent. It also helps them develop a more realistic understanding of the circumstances and model appropriate interaction.

2. Contact and visitation helps sustain the parent/child bond.

Research proves that continued contact and visitation, when appropriate, is essential to healthy development, fosters a bond that is crucial to developing children, and serves as a protective factor for adolescents to lessen the chance of them committing crimes and becoming incarcerated.

3. Maintaining connection during incarceration helps decrease the recidivism rate.

Parents are less likely to re-offend. Repeated incarceration also increases the likelihood that their children will also commit crimes leading to incarceration.

4. Maintaining contact with their children helps parents maintain their parental rights.

The Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997 states that a child who has lived in foster care for 15 of the previous 22 months needs to be evaluated by child welfare for permanency. An average parent who is incarcerated is sentenced to terms longer than 22 months – increasing the probability that parental rights will be terminated. In order that their parental rights are not terminated, a strong and continued bond must be proven. Visitation and exploring other methods of maintaining contact helps maintain this parent/child bond.

5. Regular contact and visitation helps family reunification upon reentry.

Keeping the relationship current helps the reentry & reunification process upon release.

6. When appropriate, it’s best practice.

The Pennsylvania Standards for Child Welfare Practice (III. SERVICE DELIVERY CONDUCT OUTREACH TO PARENTS; OUTCOME: Permanence and Timeliness; Standard N) state that:

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The child welfare worker will make outreach efforts to the custodial and non-custodial parent from the point of intake and throughout the out-of-home care process to facilitate timely achievement of permanence for children. Outreach activities will be goal directed, based on a comprehensive family assessment, culturally relevant, and will include the parents in all aspects of service planning, service delivery, and case reviews (court and administrative).

In addition, the recent Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) indicated that Pennsylvania's child welfare agencies need to improve their efforts in connecting with and involving non-custodial parents, which includes incarcerated parents. Engaging parents who are incarcerated and advocating for visits when appropriate might call for extra time up-front; however, the benefits, especially for the child, largely outweigh the costs.

7. Unless the court orders otherwise, it's the law.

Unless court-ordered not to and documented as to why (e.g. aggravated circumstances) incarcerated parents have the same rights as other parents.

Parental engagement and/or offering the opportunity for visitation is not a choice, unless aggravated circumstances have been found by the court to exist and/or the court determines that visitation would be detrimental to the child and/or is not in the child's best interest. Unless otherwise documented, incarcerated parents have the same rights as other parents, including regular contact with their children.



Source: Adapted from Brooks, S. (Spring 2008) *Reaching out: Current issues in child welfare practice in rural communities*. UC Davis, CA: Northern California Training Academy, The Center for Human Services, as adapted from Ann Adalist-Estrin and the Family Corrections Network.