



**Outcomes Better for Children with Regular Visits: Missouri Children in Foster Care, Permanency Outcomes, and Caseworker Visits**

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# Outcomes Better for Children with Regular Visits: Missouri Children in Foster Care, Permanency Outcomes, and Caseworker Visits

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*Meliny Staysa and Michael Kelly*

## Worker Visits with Children as a Federal Requirement

Federal law requires states to have standards for the content and frequency of caseworker visits for children who are in foster care under the responsibility of the state (Administration for Children and Families, n.d.). At a minimum, these standards must ensure that children are visited on a monthly basis. The caseworker visits must be well-planned and focused on issues pertinent to case planning and service delivery to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of the children. The majority of the visits are to occur in the residence of the child. This is a tough standard but with good reason.

The Administration on Children and Families, Children's Bureau reported that outcomes were found to be better during Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) 2001-2004 and during 2007-2008 for foster children nationwide when visits were held consistently. Findings from the reviews linked worker visits with children to improved outcomes of meeting the needs of the child and of achieving permanency (Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau [ACFCB], n.d.). Visits resulted in an increased level of involvement of the child in the case planning and engagement in the permanency effort. They helped in building a bond between worker and child resulting in the engagement of the worker in the case and an increased awareness by the worker of the child's needs. Youth perceived the visits as helpful in moving towards permanency (ACFCB, n.d.). Worker visits in the placement setting also provid-

ed staff the opportunity to assure the protection and safety of the child in their placement.

## Affirmation of Relationship between Caseworker Visits with Children and Permanency Outcomes

The Missouri Children's Division put the theory of improved outcomes to the test. The Quality Assurance Unit compared five outcomes of 11,043 Missouri foster care children who during FFY10 received visits each and every full month the child was in care (Group A) to the outcomes of 2,456 children who had one or more missed monthly visits during the year (Group B).

Of children in Group A, 32% exited foster care during FFY10, while only 27% of children in Group B exited foster care. Permanency outcomes measured included the achievement of permanency<sup>1</sup>, exits to reunification, legalized guardianships, and finalized adoptions. The results affirmed the federal findings and proved the theory true for Missouri's children. Outcomes were determined to be better for the Missouri children who had visits every month compared to children having one or more missed monthly visits as follows:

The percent which achieved permanency:  
30% (Group A) vs. 24% (Group B)

The percent which were reunified with parents:  
13% (Group A) vs. 10% (Group B)

The percent of exits to legal guardianships:  
45% (Group A) vs. 24% (Group B)

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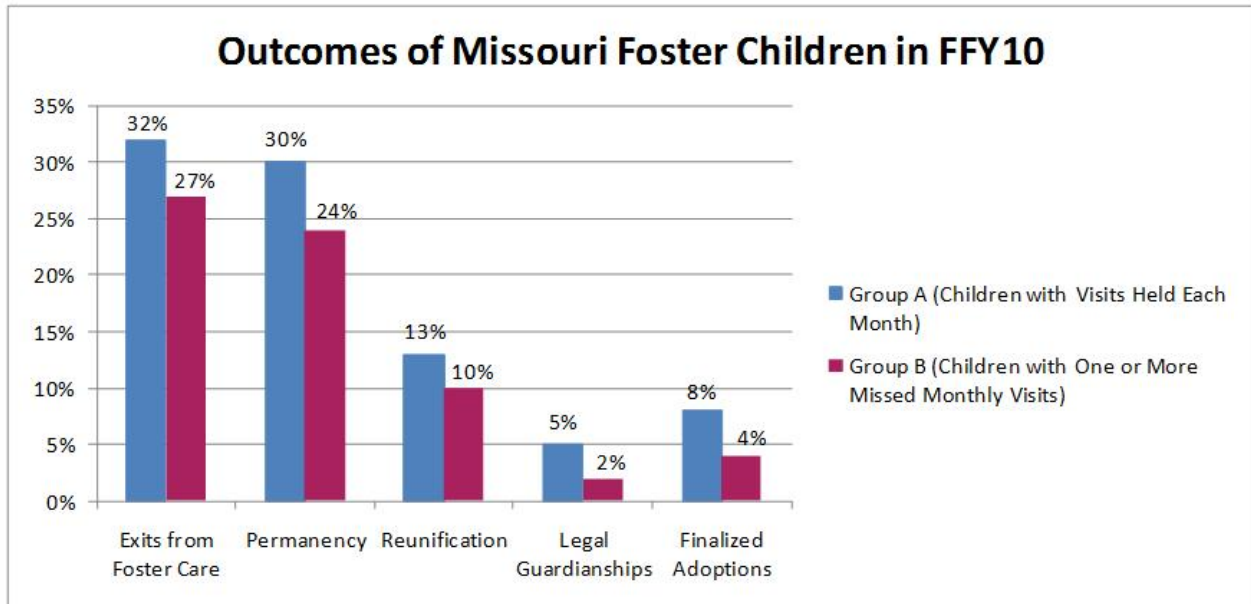
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<sup>1</sup> Permanency includes reunification, finalized adoption, living with relatives, and legal guardianship.

## Outcomes Better with Regular Visits

Figure 1. Outcomes of Missouri Foster Children During FFY10 Based on Regularity of Caseworker Visits with Children.



The percent which were adopted: 8% (Group A) vs. 4% (Group B)

The chart above demonstrates better outcomes were achieved in the areas of exits from foster care, permanency achieved, reunification with parents, legalized guardianships, and finalized adoptions during FFY10 for Missouri foster children who received visits each month compared to children who had one or more missed monthly visits during the year.

### Permanency Planning is Important for Foster Children

Foster care can be a safe and appropriate alternative when a child cannot safely remain at home. However, once in foster care, permanency planning and achieving permanency for children is essential. Theory suggests that permanency planning for children in foster care is connected to a child's stability, security, identity formation, attachment, and child development, and achieving

permanency contributes to the child's emotional health and development (Thoburn, 2003). Furthermore, reviews of the literature have proposed that foster youth who do not achieve permanency but who rather age out of the system have limited education and employment experience, relatively poor mental and physical health, and a relatively high likelihood of experiencing unwanted outcomes such as homelessness, incarceration, and non-marital pregnancy (Collins, 2001; McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Piliavin, 1996).

As protection and permanency are two of the Missouri Children's Division's guiding principles, conducting frequent quality caseworker visits with children has become a key method for applying these principles in practice.

### Applying Findings to Practice

The Missouri Children's Division met the mutually established federal requirement for case-

worker visits with foster children for FFY10. Eighty-two percent (82%) of children were visited by their case managers each and every month they were in care, surpassing the 76% requirement. Of those visits held, 98% were held in the child's placement.

Recognizing the significance of caseworker visits with children, several new initiatives were put into place at the Children's Division in Missouri to continue to increase the awareness of the importance of visits and to further improve staff performance. A poster campaign entitled "Every Child, Every Month," made possible with funding provided by the Children's Trust Fund, commenced in October 2010. In designing the poster, assistance was sought out from older youth in foster care to provide quotes on the importance of caseworker visits to make the practice effort more personal for staff. The youths' quotes were included on the posters with mock photos and placed in Children's Division and contracted foster care case management agency offices to strengthen the awareness and commitment of staff to make visits a priority. The posters are intended to encourage staff and supervisors who regularly hold visits, because their hard work and efforts to make visits a priority are not only appreciated by the children, but have also contributed to better outcomes for them. The posters also serve as a reminder to staff and their supervisors who are not yet conducting visits every month that children need to be seen frequently and regularly. An additional strategy has been the development of three new reports to assist supervisors in oversight and worker scheduling of visits. The reports are distributed monthly to field supervisors identifying children having missed visits by out-of-county "service" workers and visits missed during a month of transfer between workers or between offices, which were determined to be top causes for missed visits in FFY10. Agency leadership is highly aware of the

importance of caseworker visits and assures continuous oversight of progress.

## Conclusion

Research examining the significance of permanency planning as it relates to a child's emotional health and development suggests that permanency planning is vitally important for children and is not only justified, but should be given major emphasis (Waddell, Macmillan, & Pietrantonio, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial for caseworkers to conduct practice as effectively as possible to increase the likelihood and timeliness of permanency for the youth.

Caseworker visits with foster children were found to be a case activity having a positive impact on permanency outcomes for foster children nationally. After reviewing outcomes for Missouri foster children according to the consistency and frequency of caseworker visits, the Children's Division affirmed better permanency outcomes when caseworker visits with children were held consistently. As such, the Missouri Children's Division continues efforts to make consistent caseworker visits with foster children a priority in order to better meet the needs of children in foster care and to increase permanency.

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