

## THE WEAPONIZATION OF WHITENESS IN CHILD WELFARE

# Parallels Between Child Welfare Parenting Time and Prison Visitation

by MJ (Maleeka Jihad), Shayna Koran and Sonja Ulrich, DSW, MSW

### PART 2

This article is the second in a three-part series for *The Guardian*: “The Weaponization of Whiteness in Child Welfare”, featuring Guardian contributor MJ (Maleeka Jihad) and various experts in child welfare as co-contributors. Find the first article in the Fall 2022 issue and look for the final installment in 2023.

“Any system built to actually protect children should in NO WAY look the same as a system purposely built to punish adults.” — Joyce McMillan<sup>1</sup>

### Visit Time vs. Parenting Time

“Looking back on both experiences, I have had more time with my dad in prison than I had with my children when the department of human services had custody of them.” — Shayna Koran

In child welfare court-involved cases, following the removal of children from their families, parents and/or caregivers are generally subjected to participating in supervised visitation as a way to see and spend time with their children. Historically, the purpose of visits between children in foster care and their families has been to maintain the parent-child connection when separated. Visitation for children and families is a formalized process, controlled by the system and the worker assigned to the case, and is intended to provide oversight to families whom the child welfare agency deems unsafe.

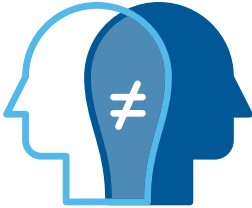
Public child welfare systems across the nation refer to parent-child time as different things, each having the authority to define the family contact program for their service area. Over the past several years, jurisdictions have recognized the need to change the perspective of visitation, shifting from the term “visits,” which has been used more commonly with settings such as prisons or treatment facilities, to “parenting time” or “family time.”<sup>2</sup> Multiple driving factors exist for this shift, including the recognition of the importance of parent-child time in promoting quicker reunifications while ensuring the time together is more natural and promotes connectedness and strong relations within the family that has been separated.

**Making a policy shift enforced by law:** *In Washington State, family time has been recognized as critical to strengthening and preserving the family bond and achieving successful reunification. To ground this change, the state passed a law requiring the first contact between parents and children to be within the first seventy-two hours after a child is removed. Additionally, family time is required to be changed to unsupervised at thirty days unless the worker can provide evidence that removing a visit monitor would create a safety threat.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Joyce McMillan, <https://jmacforfamilies.org>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. *Family time and visitation for children and youth in out-of-home care*. Information Memorandum ACYF-CB-IM-20-02 (2020). Available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-20-02>.

<sup>3</sup> Washington State Department of Children, Youth, & Families. *HB 1194 Impacts on Family Time Visitation*. (2021). Available at: <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/news/hb-1194-impacts-family-time-visitation>.



The shift in recognizing the importance of parent-child time has been a much-welcomed policy change that still needs more work and effort to actually shift the practice on the front lines of child welfare and to ensure families have a different experience. The current system still does not recognize the families' unique cultural, ethnic, or tradition-based parenting. The system does not recognize the value of cross-cultural differences in parenting and promotes the parenting standards and beliefs of those who are in the position to pass judgment (caseworkers and visit monitors). Parenting practices and beliefs are strongly related to the attitudes, beliefs, traditions, and values of the cultural or ethnic group to which the family belongs.

*The American Psychological Association (APA) defines parenting practices as the shared goals of ensuring children's health and safety, preparing children for life as productive adults, and transmitting cultural values. Researchers have described different human parenting styles — ways in which parents interact with their children — with most classifications varying on the dimensions of emotional warmth and control.<sup>4</sup>*

## Cultural Respect: White-Centered Parenting

White centering is putting the cultural norms, values, behaviors, beliefs, and feelings of white people (individualism) above any other culture of people. White-centered parenting is the psychological construction of creating and supporting healthy development of children through the lens of white cultural standards. The examination of white-centered parenting is the “normal” way of parenting within the social constructs of child welfare.

Eliminating the inclusiveness and cultural respect for other (non-white-American) parenting styles, including the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors towards children in care, is harmful to system-involved families, as it confirms structural biases within family visitations. It also confirms the false narrative that people of color are unable to parent their own children.

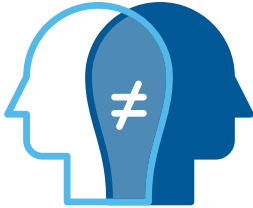
The analysis of attitudes, treatment, and behaviors of parent-child relationships through the lens of curiosity and humility is the culturally respectful way to interrupt differential parenting styles.

*The American Sociological Association also published a 2002 study that indicates African American parents favor the disciplinarian or authoritarian approach to parenting. The study states that Black parents may be harsher on their children in an attempt to prepare them for a world that is filled with discrimination and societal biases that do not favor people of color.<sup>5</sup>*

One example of how parents of Black children often face discrimination during supervised visitation time has been the task of styling the children's hair. This has been mischaracterized as not properly “spending” time with their children, but rather “wasting” time and causing discomfort to the children. Associate professor of Sociocultural Psychology at Tulane University, Dr. Marva L. Lewis, who created and founded the Center for Natural

<sup>4</sup> American Psychological Association. APA Dictionary of Psychology (2nd ed. 2015).

<sup>5</sup> King, T. “Parenting in the Black Community: Why Raising Children is Difficult for us.” *Atlanta Black Star*. (July 2015). Available at: <https://atlantablackstar.com/2015/07/14/psychology-parenting-exploring-new-ideas-black-motherhood-fatherhood/>.



**WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE:** A form of racism centered upon the belief that white people are superior to people of other racial backgrounds and that whites should politically, economically, and socially dominate non-whites. – National Educational Association

Connections (CNC), studied the connectedness of Black mothers and children and their relationship with hair. She discussed within her studies that hair care time facilitates some core parenting behaviors that lead to more secure attachments: positive verbal interaction, loving physical touch, and responsive listening.<sup>6</sup>

While system-involved Black families can be penalized for spending time during visits on hair styling, Indigenous children in foster care are disrespected by receiving (unauthorized) haircuts from their foster families. Not cutting the hair of Indigenous children (placed in foster care) without parental permission and court approval is standard. However, this policy is often misunderstood or not followed. The reason for the authorization of haircuts for Native children is the relationship many Indigenous tribes have with their hair. Hair symbolizes their association with their family and their tribe. The meaning behind a Native American's hair symbolizes strong cultural identity that promotes self-esteem, self-respect, a sense of belonging, and a healthy sense of pride.<sup>7</sup>

## Implications of Poverty

Children enter foster care for a variety of reasons, of which poverty was found to be an underlying factor in the majority of cases. Neglect, inclusive of poverty-related concerns, constitutes the reason that the majority of children are removed from their families. There is no federal definition of poverty, leaving states to define it for themselves. Poverty can be defined as an inability to provide housing/shelter, food/nutrition, and clothing for children.<sup>8</sup> In 2020, out of children who were confirmed by child welfare agencies to be victims of maltreatment, 76% were found to have been neglected.<sup>9</sup> Physical or sexual abuse occurred in only 25% of cases.<sup>10</sup> To further complicate the issue, and recognizing the existence of disproportionality, 2019, 63% of Black children in care were removed from their home for neglect, and 18.2% of Black children in care were removed from their homes due to physical or sexual abuse.<sup>11</sup>

*Food insecurity impacts 1 in 8 households with children. One in 6 (16.1 percent or 11.6 million) children lived in poverty in 2020, an increase from 14.4 (or 1.1 million children) from 2019.<sup>12</sup>*

Unfortunately, due to financial instability experienced by families in poverty, fresh and healthier food options may be less attainable. Poverty leads to financial constraints that in turn lead to the consumption of cheap, high-energy staple foods, primarily carbohydrates

6 Lewis, M. L. "Hair combing interactions: A new paradigm for research with African-American mothers." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 69(4), 504–514. (1999).

7 Sister Sky. *The Significance of Hair in Native American Culture*. (January 2019). Available at: <https://sistersky.com/blogs/sister-sky/the-significance-of-hair-in-native-american-culture>.

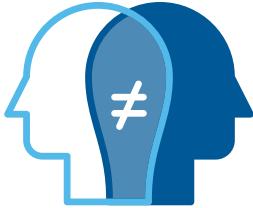
8 Duva, J. & Metzger, S. "Addressing poverty as a major risk factor in child neglect: Promising policy and practice." *American Humane*, 25(1), 63–74.

9 Annie E. Casey Foundation. "Children who are confirmed by child protective services as victims of maltreatment by maltreatment type in the United States." Available at: <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bar/9906-children-who-are-confirmed-by-child-protective-services-as-victims-of-maltreatment-by-maltreatment-type?loc=1&loct=1#1/any/false/574/3885,3886,3887,3888,3889,3890/19241>.

10 *Id.*

11 Children's Rights. "Ending The Unjust, Unnecessary And Devastating Removal Of Black Children From Their Families." Available at: <https://www.childrensrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CR-2021-Fighting-Racism-in-Child-Welfare-Advocacy-Paper-Summary-1.pdf>.

12 Food Research & Action Center. "Data & Statistics on Hunger." *Hunger & Poverty in America*. (2021). <https://frac.org/hunger-poverty-america>.



and fats, rather than nutritionally dense food.<sup>13</sup> Many parents and or caregivers involved in the child welfare system may not have access to more affordable nutritious foods to provide to their families due to where they live, which is known as food deserts. Approximately 23.5 million people are living in what is considered to be a food desert, and more than half of them are considered “low-income” areas.<sup>14</sup>

*Families that earn less than 200% of the federal poverty line (\$43,920 for a family of three in 2021) make up nearly 85% of families investigated for child abuse or neglect.<sup>15</sup>*

**CASE EXAMPLE:** Excerpt from a Visitation Monitor's Notes: “She brought two choices for lunch, some baby bell cheese, and popcorn for later. She brought movies today. She brought several types of candy and snacks, high in sugar today. The squeeze juices (fruit punch flavored) the gummy bears and Hi-Chews and starbursts, Cheetos.”

Parents are instructed to bring healthy food and no sugar to visits and are often characterized poorly for failure to do so. However, the perception of what is considered healthy is determined by the observer of the visits. Parents and caregivers should not be penalized during parenting time for lacking the resources to provide nutritious snacks and meals for their children. Failure to provide the types of food expected by the visitation rules is not a reflection of a parent's lack of care, but a reflection on a parent's lack of economic capacity, and as such, should be recognized as a systemic barrier to meeting visitation expectations.

## Influence of Perception & Bias

Individual caseworkers approach their role with families differently. Although they may respond to the same policy and practice requirements, caseworkers bring their own practice values to work. In addition, the caseworker brings their personal, individual, and unique characteristics, beliefs, and perceptions to the workplace. Part of a caseworkers' professional identification includes a connection to their personal life and the social circles they are engaged in.

Personal factors of the caseworker, including their history of abuse and neglect, their beliefs, temperament, how they interpret information, and the level of empathy they have for their clients all influence their decision-making process.<sup>16</sup> Researchers found that the personal practice beliefs of the caseworkers regarding whether or not to keep families together or remove children to ensure their safety, were the most influential factors in the decision-making process.<sup>17</sup> As visitation and family time are seen as a critical component to reunification, the same decision-making process and factors can also influence a caseworker's decisions on family time or visitation for families on their caseload.

The role of most visitation monitors is to ensure the safety of the child while providing an opportunity for parent-child interactions. The visitation monitor is responsible for accurately documenting what is seen and heard during the visit. While the specific requirements

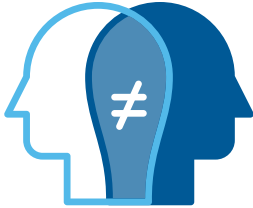
13 Siddiqui, F., Salam, R., Lassi, Z., & Das, J. “The intertwined relationship between malnutrition and poverty.” *Frontiers in Public Health*. (2020). Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2020.00453/full>.

14 United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. “Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food- Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences: Report to Congress.” (June 2009). Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=42729>.

15 Chapin Hall. “Child and Family Well-being System: Economic & Concrete Supports as a Core Component.” (April 2022). Available at: <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Economic-Supports-deck.pdf>.

16 Delgado, P., Pinto, V. S., & Carvalho, J. M. S. “Attitudes and decision-making in the child protection system: A comparison of students and professionals.” *Criminology & Social Integration Journal*, 25(2), 2–14. (2017). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31299/ksi.25.2.1>.

17 Ulrich, S. “The Perceptions and Practices of Child Welfare Caseworkers and Decision-Making Related to Reunification.” [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. (2022)



**CASE EXAMPLE:** Excerpt from a Visitation Monitor's Notes: "The father said, "Come here, I'm going to change you! Quickly." The father laid the [child] on the sofa and handed the diaper to her...[the child] squirmed and kicked her feet while laughing. The father said, "There's no more time! We need to go!" The child screamed and hit her father. He grabbed her wrists and pushed them down to [the child's] sides saying, "Listen, I'm not playing!" in a loud voice. The father talked to her in a loud voice in Spanish. He finally caught her and laid her down and put the diaper on and then told her in a very stern voice, "Put your socks and shoes on." Due to unsafe behaviors from the father, this VS removed the children from the visit and found the security guard. The security guard let this VS and the children into the back office area. This VS waited in the office with the children, and case supervisors until the father left."

for the position of visitation monitor varies between public child welfare systems, the one consistent factor is the lack of education and training regarding the issues facing many of these families in crisis. Yet, despite the limited life, education and training experience, the visitation monitors can be some of the most influential parties in the family case, influencing the ultimate decision of the caseworker to either support or deny family reunification. Through their documentation, visitation supervisors paint an image of the parent and child for the department and ultimately for the decision-makers at the judicial level.

Visits are often stopped due to allegations of the child demonstrating outbursts or behavior problems following the visit with their family. When this occurs, the knee-jerk response is to associate the visits with the bad behavior of the child and move to further restrict visitation between the parent and child. Rather, research recommends that caseworkers assess the issues deeply and try to understand the parent-child relationship, which often demonstrates that what is needed in the case is not to further restrict visitation, but rather to expand it.<sup>18</sup>

Providers and participants in court matters involving children and families need to truly consider when they assess the "best interests of the children" whether that argument is skewed by the personal perspective of the assigned worker, caregivers, or providers in the case, including the visitation monitor. Courts and other parties in the case see the visit supervisor as an "expert" although they may not be trained to assess parenting. The decisions made about visits, by people with limited life and educational experiences, ultimately influence the final decisions and recommendations made for a family in resolving their child welfare case.

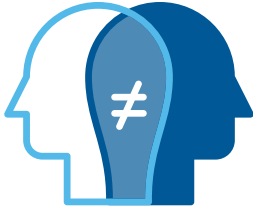
## Levels of Visitation Supervision

When parents and children are separated by the child welfare system, the action of removal itself is often combined with an automatic assumption of safety threat, therefore requiring the highest level of supervision for family time. It is as if once a parent and child become policed by the child welfare agency, rules are applied, that are not always needed, to ensure the safety of the child. Even though most children enter out-of-home care following allegations of neglect, once you enter through the doors of the child welfare system, each parent and child are treated the same, with the visitation and family time being required to be supervised, most often in an office environment.

Assumptions and perceptions about a parents' involvement in the child welfare system can influence workers and providers to assume a parent is incapable of parenting, and therefore automatically requiring supervised visits. While safety is the first consideration when developing a plan for visitation, it is critical to understand that not every situation, and not every parent and child, needs to be supervised.

Treating every case and every situation with an assumption that there are safety threats present is an area where public child welfare systems can significantly improve in

18 McWey, L., Acock, A., & Porter, B. "The impact of continued contact with biological parents upon the mental health of children in foster care." *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 1338-1345. (2010).



**CASE EXAMPLE:** Case Example - Excerpt from a Visitation Monitor's Notes: "When this VS picked up the children at the caregiver's home, the caregiver told this VS that both of the children have been acting out and exhibiting behaviors leading up to the visit. [Child 1] ran into a room and locked himself inside. [Child 2] cried, and was kicking and screaming when the caregiver put her in the car seat to go to visit, and she cried on the way to the visit. When this VS put [Child 1] in the car to get into the car seat, he jumped out of the seat and attempted to go to the front seat."

responding to the needs of children and families. Through proper safety assessments and identification of existing safety threats, and factoring in protective factors that mitigate the threats, child welfare systems are well-equipped to provide families with the level of supervision needed based on the reasons the child was removed from the home. Too often systems confuse elements of risk and safety when they are not interchangeable. Risk refers to the likelihood of future abuse or neglect and is seen on a continuum of high risk to low risk. Safety refers to immediate or impending danger or threats of serious harm. Safety is assessed at different points in the case and does not exist on a continuum. If it is determined that a safety threat exists, caseworkers should assess and identify protective factors, to determine if the safety threat can be mitigated and supervision not required.<sup>19</sup>

Through an appropriate assessment of true safety threats, extended family or other informal support systems can support parent/child contact for families that need less (or no) supervision. Efforts should always be made to support families to have the most optimal family time possible, in the most comfortable environment possible, and in a manner that allows for the family to have a natural interaction with one another. In order to achieve these goals, plans for family contact must be made with the family and be designed to support the parent-child attachment and bond, while supporting the parent to participate in any needed services.

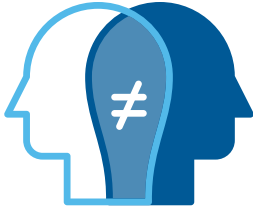
RISK VS. SAFETY		
Likelihood	vs.	Imminent
Potential	vs.	Observable
Historical Actions	vs.	Current Actions

Visitation or family time plans should be reviewed on a regular basis and assessed for risk and safety to the children, always with the lens of decreasing oversight to allow parents and children to be in the most natural environment possible without supervision. Changes in visits should never be based on a reward or punishment for parental participation and compliance with case plans. Visits are the child's right and need to always be seen through the lens of the child when developing plans, considering changes, and making shifts to the plans. The level and frequency of family time should be reflective of the families' progress toward achieving the established goals for reunification.

## Frequency of Visits

Parents are responsible to work around the schedules of everyone else to ensure they get any time with their children. Visitation rules created by the department require unrealistic expectations of parents, under the guise of positively supporting parents. They are not consistent with how families would actually relate in their own homes. Some jurisdictions use a standard set of hours that is automatic for every family working with the child welfare

<sup>19</sup> See generally American Bar Association. *Child Safety: A Guide for Judges and Attorneys*. (2009). Available at: <https://www.americanbar.org/products/inv/book/215601/>.



system. This results in plans that are driven off of the public child welfare systems' need based on resources, rather than the needs of the family to support reunification.

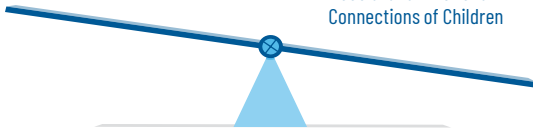
Family time in the child's natural setting should be encouraged. For example, supporting parents to attend school functions, medical appointments, and extracurricular activities can be healthy for the child and encourage natural connections and interactions for the family. Foster parents, while maybe well-intentioned, tend to have a voice in such decisions, deterring the public child welfare system from supporting parental attendance at school settings. Depending on the situation, some parents are not allowed to see their child outside of the regularly scheduled visitation time.

**RISK FACTORS**

- Drugs and Substance Abuse
- Domestic Violence
- Lack of Understanding of Child Development
- Parenting Stress
- Conflict/Unstable Housing

**PROTECTIVE FACTORS**

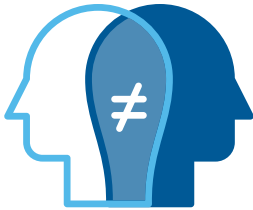
- Knowledge of Parenting and of Child and Youth Development
- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Concrete Supports for Parents
- Social and Emotional Connections of Children



Frequent visits are strongly connected to increased permanency and well-being for children.<sup>20</sup> However, nationally, public child welfare systems are inconsistent in how they approach minimum levels of contact for parents and children. Ultimately, many recommendations on how much time is provided for families is driven by the caseworker assigned to work with the family, within the limits of the policy in their jurisdiction. With such different recommendations and levels of guidance across the nation, children and families can experience very different scenarios depending on their geographical situation. For

example, historically some states have had a minimum standard of contact of one time per week, other states the minimum is monthly. Considering these two differences, the one state that would only provide weekly visits would lead to 52 visits in one year. The other experience of minimum monthly contact would only leave the family with 12 contacts per year. These significant differences in policy also contribute to the differences in well-being for children and families and ultimately impact permanency outcomes.

<sup>20</sup> See ACYF-CB-IM-20-02, *supra* note 2.



The rules for visitation for families in the child welfare system can be more stringent than rules for visitation with people who are incarcerated.

Reasons used for restricting visiting opportunities for families:

Lack of available supervision monitors

Lack of community agencies/providers

Foster parents' schedules

Court approval required

Behavior of the child before, during, or after visits

Parents not complying with service requirements

Parents are not "safe"

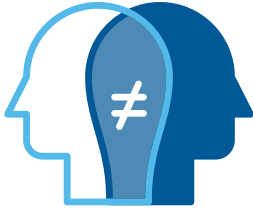
Child Welfare Visitation Rules <sup>21</sup>	Prison/Incarceration Visitation Rules
Level of visitations are determined by the assigned caseworker.	Level of visitation determined by prison policy
Visits are only for the immediate family the child was removed from. Extended family members are often not allowed to participate in visitation.	Visitors can include immediate family, extended family, and professionals during visit times.
Caseworker approves letters, messages, or photos brought to the visit before giving them to the child.	Mail is viewed and screened by prison personnel prior to giving it to the inmates.
Confirmation of attendance at visits is required by a certain time or the visits are automatically canceled.	When visiting an inmate, people need to work with the prison to schedule the visit.
Use of cell phones is discouraged and, in many jurisdictions, not allowed. Parents are discouraged from making or receiving calls or texts during the visit.	Cell phones are not allowed during visits with inmates and personal items must be secured prior to entering the visitation area.
If visitation rules are broken, the visit will be interrupted or terminated by the visit supervisor.	If an individual does not follow the rules, the visit may be terminated, and visitation privileges may be suspended by prison administration.
No visits during holidays or government closures.	All institutions have visiting hours on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays; and most have them at other times during the week.

Recommendations for parent-child contact should be individualized based on the needs of the family. As such, the average number of visits and time must be connected to the age of the child and the time needed to promote and maintain bonding and attachment.<sup>22</sup> By thinking differently about who needs supervision and who does not, systems can support families more effectively, promote positive relationships, and put the resources and supervision where it is most needed – on the small number of higher risk cases. Re-evaluating how supervision requirements are assessed for family time has the potential to also free time for caseworkers who are monitoring visits themselves due to limited resources.

<sup>21</sup> Both sets of rules are intended to be illustrative and not inclusive or exclusive of all visitation rules in child welfare and prison settings.

<sup>22</sup> Smariga, M. "Visitation with infants and toddlers in foster care: What judges and attorneys need to know." *ABA Center on Children and the Law*. (2007). Available at: [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center\\_on\\_children\\_and\\_the\\_law/parentrepresentation/policy\\_brief2.authcheckdam.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/center_on_children_and_the_law/parentrepresentation/policy_brief2.authcheckdam.pdf).





## Harmful Results of Institutionalized Visitation

*“Walking into a prison visit is the same thing as walking into supervised parenting time with the department of human service. You are getting the same feelings of humiliation, nervousness, and hopelessness. No matter what direction you turn, something you do or say is being used against you. It is so easy to punish you and take visit time away, but it is nearly impossible to increase and get meaningful parenting time. (e.g., when has a parent been allowed to throw a birthday party and invite the collective community and family the child had before removal).” – Shayna Koran*

A lack of transparency leads to a lack of trust, not only in the visitation process, but with all professionals and providers. Visitation policy prevents caregivers from discussing factors of the case with the children, leading to increased anxiety about the families' future outcome. Without the opportunity to process the traumatic events that occurred at the time of the family separation, children may internalize that they are the reason why they were taken from their caregivers. Children are not permitted to share or express their concerns or fears to their parents during the visit about whether or not they feel safe in their placement.

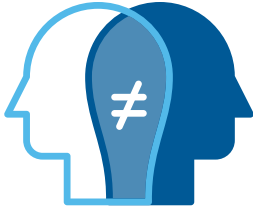
In addition, visitation environments are often unnatural and sterile, and parents often experience anxiety during the visits due to the heightened level of scrutiny in their actions. This dynamic leads to abnormal and non-authentic relationship interactions between the parents and children. Lack of flexibility, as it relates to visit locations, normalizes the idea that the family needs continued surveillance. And when visit schedules change or visits are suspended, often children are not made aware as to the reasons why, increasing anxiety and mistrust.

*“Though I missed my parents deeply and was excited to see them on our visit days, I had anxiety at the thought of sitting in the room and being watched as though the parents, who I love and adored, were perpetrators. I hated the way the building looked, I hated the smell of the building, I hated the old and dirty toys that were given for us to entertain ourselves and I hated how our family was judged for how we loved each other.” — MJ*

## Recommendations for Supporting Positive Family Time

*“Remember that the point of the child welfare system is not to create parents that are perfect, but to support parents to care for their children safely. Families are worth preserving using support and assistance, not power and control.” — Sonja Ulrich*

- Recognize and enforce a child's fundamental right to visit with their parents.
- Ensure staff have respect for the families' culture as it relates to the time they spend together (i.e., staff members to match the culture of the family, including language when possible)
- Caseworkers, GALs, and other key professionals working with the family should attend parenting time regularly, spreading out observation time to not be intrusive to the family.



*Biases  
elevated  
with power,  
privilege,  
and  
influence  
is racism.  
Check  
your bias.*

- Accurately assess safety and risk for every family, including the assessment of protective factors that can be used to mitigate any existing safety or risk concerns.
- Recognize your role and power in supporting a family to reach the goal of reunification.
- Become familiar with the agency's visitation rules and requirements and obtain a copy of any visitation handbooks, policies, requirements, and rules.
- Advocate for parenting time to include opportunities for participation in the child's day-to-day schedule, including appointments and extracurricular activities.
- Encourage placement caregivers to promote opportunities for parents and children to spend time together.
- Ensure transparency with the family about any observations that will be reported. All key professionals and the parents should receive copies of the visitation reports in a timely manner.

## **Opportunities to Reflect:**

### **Visit Supervisors**

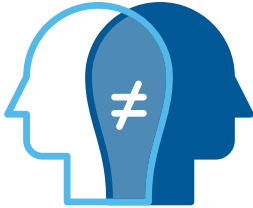
- What are the qualifications of the visitation supervisor?
- Does the visitation supervisor possess the knowledge, skills, and experience required to support the family?
- How does the visitation supervisor adjust to the cultural needs of the family?
- How does the visit supervisor support the engagement and communication between the parents and placement caregivers?

### **Creating Quality Parenting Time**

- Is the parenting time able to be held in the family home?
- Is there another family member or close friend that would provide space in their home for parenting time or another location to create the least restrictive environment?
- Is the space for the family clean, quiet, and respectful of the family's privacy?
- Does the space include comfortable seating and a clean area to play (i.e., toys/activities that encourage parent-child interaction, snacks, water, changing table, etc.)?
- Is parenting time scheduled on a day and at a time that meets the family's scheduling needs around their work and other responsibilities, permitting travel time if needed?
- Is the frequency of parenting time able to be increased?

### **Addressing Systemic Racism in the Family Regulation System**

- What are you doing as a professional to decrease injustices that families endure by being system-involved?
- How are you removing structural barriers to family reunification?



- What steps have you taken to challenge the existing belief system and misconceptions about families involved in the system?

## Addressing Individual Assumptions and Biases

- How do you define “good” parenting?
- Are you a parent?
- Where did you develop your “style” of parenting?
- How would you describe your parents’ “style” of parenting?
- What books and or guides helped you develop your “parenting” skills?
- How do you separate your own value-driven perspective from decisions made in the case?
- How do you respectfully engage with the family? ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS:



**MJ (Maleeka Jihad)** is the Director of the MJ Consulting and the nonprofit MJCF: Coalition, an agency focused on dismantling systemic racism in the family policing (child welfare) system through education, advocacy, and policy reform. MJ recently took on the new role as Director of the Family Justice Programs at the Colorado Office of Respondent Parents’ Counsel (ORPC) where she provides trainings and consultations to professionals as it relates to race, culture, and community within dependency and neglect court cases.



**Shayna Koran** is a parent advocate at the Colorado Office of Respondent Parents’ Counsel (ORPC) and a resource advocate at the Office of the Alternate Defense Counsel (ADC). She is a full-time college student working towards her bachelor’s degree in human service with a minor in addiction studies. Shayna is married with three kids and lives in Rifle, Colorado.



**Sonja Ulrich, DSW, MSW** is a social worker with more than thirty years of child welfare experience. Her work history includes national training and technical assistance, system change initiatives, direct practice, and forensic social work. She has provided assessments and opinions on the practice standards in child welfare cases, risk and safety assessments, active and reasonable efforts, ICWA, and overcoming barriers to denied home studies to support permanency. Her recent research examined the decision-making process of caseworkers around reunification and the impact of their perception in the decision-making process. The findings demonstrated significant bias present in the decision-making process surrounding reunification and placement with relatives.