

VISITATION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF FOUR

BIRTH TO SIX MONTHS:

Developmental consideration: Infants are learning to discriminate between caregivers and strangers. When separated from primary caregiver they show stress such as irregular or problematic eating or sleep and excessive crying (more than a few minutes). This is a sign of distress in a baby and increases cortisone in the brain and interferes with brain development. Babies have no sense of time so a few minutes with a baby is the same as an hour. The importance of the visitation is regularity and frequency.

Recommended visitation for non-primary: Several times a week for 30 to 60 minutes, preferably with the primary caregiver present so that baby will be comforted by the presence of the primary. The baby learns the sound, look and feel of the non-primary which is important for bonding. The more frequent the visits, the better the bonding. No overnights away from the primary caregiver.

SIX MONTHS TO EIGHTEEN MONTHS:

Developmental considerations: Children normally start to form clear attachments around 8 months. These attachments form a secure base from which the child can explore the world. Unpredictability in the child's daily patterns causes stress. Evidence of a stress, non-verbal child is excessive crying or clinging (more than a few minutes). Caregivers need to be responsive to the child's cues and be emotionally available to the child. The child is learning both positive and negative emotions and the parent needs to need to model appropriately.

Recommended visitation for non-primary: Visitation should still be several times a week but for longer periods of time at the home of the non-primary. No overnights. If the child shows signs of stress a, take the child back to the primary until they get used to the new environment. At this age, a child still does not understand time and simply believes that the primary has abandoned them. Try to have pictures of the primary caregiver to show the child, also familiar toys (children recognize scent). Use the same feeding schedule and food as the primary uses so that the child feels that there are familiar things in its environment. Consult with primary to stay current on sleeping and eating patterns. Given time and patience, the child will attach to the non-primary the same as the primary caregiver.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS TO THREE YEARS:

Developmental considerations: Child psychologists recommend that a child does not stay overnight until they have developed some language skills so that they can communicate their needs and understand the parent's response. This is also a time when children go through separation anxiety. The objective of the parent should be to create a safe place through predictability, routine and structure. Signs of distress in a child this age is withdrawal, changes in eating or toileting and delays in development. A stressed child is concentrating on protecting itself, not learning all of the skills that the normal human child is supposed to be learning at this stage.

Recommended visitation for non-primary: Overnight visitation can start when the child has some language skills. It should start slowly building up to more overnights as the child shows that it is comfortable in the home of the non-primary. It is to be expected that there maybe regression from time to time and parents need to be sensitive to the child's comfort level. Start with one overnight preferably every week for several weeks (or months depending on the child) and then transition to a weekend for two overnights- every other weekend.

FOUR YEARS OLD

By four years old, the child should be ready for a normal visitation schedule because they are attached to the non-primary and that parent is attuned to the needs and personality of the child. However children this age often have a lot of fear because they are becoming aware of a world separate from themselves. Parents need to introduce them to new experiences in a safe manner so they gain confidence.

Below is a sample visitation plan that I just put into a parenting plan. Note that the child in question is 14 months old. His visitation has been Wednesdays from 9-5 and every Saturday at 10 to Sunday at 10. Father will not work with the Mother. Child has become clingy and cries more often;

“During the term of this parenting plan the Father shall have at a minimum, the following parenting time with the child :

From July 1, 2020 to October 1, 2020, the Father shall have the minor child every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. There will be no overnights.

From October 1, 2020 to October 1, 2021, the Father shall have the minor child Monday and Wednesday from 9:00 a.m. until he leaves for work or if he is not working until 6:00

p.m. If the Father keeps the child until 6:00 p.m., He will feed the child dinner before he delivers the child to the Mother. Every other weekend he will have the minor child from 10:00 a.m. on Saturday until 2:00 p.m. on Sunday.

From October 1, 2021 to April 1, 2023, the Father shall have the minor child on Wednesday until the Father leaves for work or if he is not working, until 6:00 p.m. He will feed the child dinner before he delivers the child to the Mother. Every other weekend from 10:00 a.m. on Saturday until 6:00 p.m. on Sunday.

From April 1, 2023 going forward, the Father shall have the minor child on Wednesday for dinner from after school until 7:00 p.m. If the parties live within a twenty-minute drive of each other, Wednesday can be from after school until the child is returned to school the next morning. When the child is not in school, the Father will have every other weekend from 10:00 a.m. on Friday until 9:00 a.m. Monday morning. Once the child is in pre-school, the Father shall have every other weekend from the time school end on Friday until 6:00 p.m. on Sunday unless the parties live within a twenty-minute drive of each other.”

Sources:

- (1) *Family Practice Guide* – Georgia Committee on Justice for Children and J4C Court Improvement Initiative
- (2) Arizona Court’s Planning Guide for Parents
- (3) Journal of Marriage and Family published by the National Council of Family Relations – article by Samantha Tornello on attachment issues in infants <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jomf.12045>