

CLEARINGHOUSE ON SUPERVISED VISITATION

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QUESTIONS FROM DIRECTORS

QUESTION:

Sometimes children arrive to visits happy but begin crying or dysregulating after seeing other children or adults upset. What might be driving this behavior, and how can staff better respond in the moment?

ANSWER:

This is called Stress Contagion, and we will discuss this further starting on page 7 of this e-press.

Understanding Shame in Child Welfare



What is Shame?

An acute awareness of one's flawed and unworthy self.

Where does it come from?

The structure of supervised visitation inherently questions a person's parenting ability, which is a deeply personal experience.



Some parents report feeling judged, exposed, or powerless during the child protection process, which can contribute to feelings of shame.

Internalizing Shame

Parents not only feel ashamed of the actions, events, and situations that led to child protection involvement, but also feel ashamed of the process itself.



Shame is one of many feelings that may arise during visitation. **Others include:**

- Confusion
- Embarrassment
- Intimidation
- Fear
- Isolation



The Effects of Shame on a Parent

- Destabilizes the caregiver's confidence in parenting
- Hinders parents' willingness to participate and communicate
- Leads to overall avoidance of professionals to escape the shame

Change is Possible

It is possible for parents to take accountability for their actions without continuing to feel shame.

Recognizing Shame Within Caregivers



Clear expectations and boundaries remain important in supervised visitation. However, combining structure with respectful and trauma-informed communication can reduce shame and improve engagement.

Noncompliance

Caregivers may feel that complying means accepting the negative view others have of them.

What 'Help' Feels Like

In supervised visitation settings, parents may feel like others are judging them for their situation.

Common Behaviors

- Minimizing concern or shifting blame to create a positive image of themselves
- Avoiding visitation professional to hide "bad" self
- Withdrawing from others to avoid a sense of exposure

Practice Considerations for Professionals

1. Consider the caregiver's broader context, including social, economic, and family circumstances.
2. Recognize that child welfare involvement can feel threatening to a parent's identity and parental role.
3. Clearly explain expectations, terminology, resources, and how the visitation process works.
4. Discuss past concerns with care, focusing on safety and growth rather than blame.

(Gibson, 2015; Gibson, 2020)



A parent experiencing shame may be hyper-focused on themselves, resulting in behavior that can seem unconcerned with the child's distress.

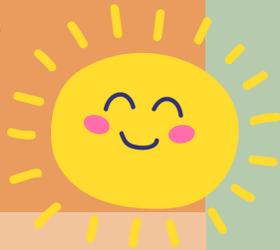


Trauma-Informed Responses to Shame



Shifting the Narrative

Communicate concerns for the caregiver's *behavior* rather than their identity, reducing the potential for shame or defensiveness.



Trauma-Informed Approach

- Keep empathy at the center of each conversation aimed at promoting safety
- Be approachable and respectful
- Treat each family as unique
- Allow parents to tell their story and take it seriously
- Acknowledge parental stress without excusing harmful behavior
- Identify caregiver's strengths

Broadening Perspective

Professionals can also identify broader issues at play such as poverty, insufficient resources, and social and economic factors.

(Gibson, 2015; Gibson, 2020; Gupta, 2015; Crompton et al., 2022)

Building a Relationship

- Build trust with parents by creating a sense of connection, acknowledging their efforts, and setting manageable expectations so they feel supported rather than judged.



See the child as part of the family, rather than separate.

Sample Positive Affirmations

- ★ "This is a stressful situation, and you're doing your best."
- ★ "We're here to support you and your child."
- ★ "Parenting is hard. Small steps matter."
- ★ "Struggling doesn't define you. It just means you're human."
- ★ "Many parents feel overwhelmed in situations like this; you're not alone."
- ★ "I can see how much you care about your child."
- ★ "Your willingness to show up says a lot about your commitment."
- ★ "This doesn't erase the progress you've made."

References



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Understanding How Stress Can Spread in Supervised Visitation

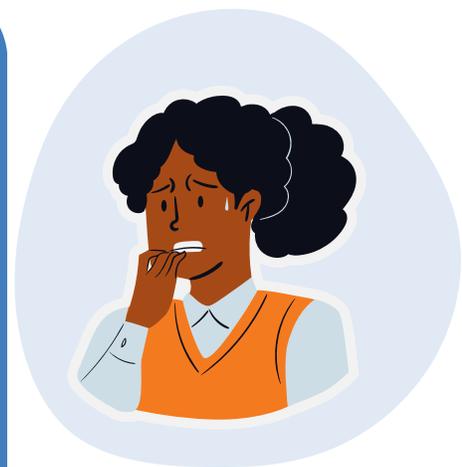
What is Stress Contagion?



- Stress contagion occurs when one person's emotional or physiological stress response is picked up and mirrored by others nearby.
- Stress can be "caught" through shared physiological responses, such as changes in heart rate or skin conductance that begin to mirror those of a stressed individual.
- People may also unconsciously mimic subtle facial expressions, body posture, and tone of voice. This automatic mirroring can lead others to internalize the same emotional state, "passing" on stress.

How Stress Spreads Without Words

- Stress does not have to be spoken to be felt by others. Humans naturally pick up on emotional cues in their environment.
- Common nonverbal cues of stress include:
 - ~ tension in the face or body
 - ~ changes in breathing patterns
 - ~ higher-pitched or strained voice
 - ~ faster or pressured speech
 - ~ pauses, hesitations, or voice cracking



(Buchanan et al., 2012; Dimitroff et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 1994; Herrando & Constantinides, 2021; Palumbo et al., 2016)

Understanding How Stress Can Spread in Supervised Visitation

How Adult Stress Affects Children

- Children are especially sensitive to the emotional states of the adults around them. Often, this awareness acts as a survival mechanism that helps them determine whether an environment feels safe.
- Children's bodies can synchronize with adult stress responses, meaning their bodies begin to mirror the stress they observe in adults.
- The relationship between adult and child stress is bidirectional and creates a feedback loop.

Stress Escalation Cycle During Visits:

Adult Stress → **Child Stress** → **Child Acting Out** → **Increased Adult Stress**



What Stress May Look Like in Children

- When children pick up on adult stress, their reactions may appear as challenging behavior. However, these responses are often stress reactions rather than intentional misbehavior.
- Children may show signs such as:
 - ~ increased clinginess or seeking reassurance
 - ~ heightened watchfulness or hypervigilance
 - ~ irritability or emotional outbursts
 - ~ nervous checking of adults' reactions
 - ~ aggression, defiance, or withdrawal



(Camisasca et al., 2019; Dijk et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025; Waters et al., 2014)

Understanding How Stress Can Spread in Supervised Visitation

Why Stress Escalates in Visitation Settings

- Supervised visits can be emotionally intense due to:
 - ~ structured rules and supervision
 - ~ limited visit time
 - ~ custody conflict or safety concerns
 - ~ reminders of past family conflict
- These conditions can cause stress to rise quickly for both parents and children.



Early Warning Signs of Escalation

Adult Signs Stress is Increasing	Child Signs Stress is Increasing
Louder voice and/or harsher tone	Restlessness or fidgeting
Fast or pressured speech	Increased watchfulness and withdrawal
Trembling, fidgeting, or visible tension	Emotional outbursts and clinginess



(Ghasemi et al., 2024; Hoffnung-Assouline & Knei-Paz, 2024; Liu et al., 2025)

Understanding How Stress Can Spread in Supervised Visitation

Role of Staff

- Emotional contagion is not always negative. Just as stress can spread between people, calm and positive emotions can also influence others in the room.
- Because of this, supervised visitation professionals play an important role in shaping the emotional climate of the visit. Maintaining a calm, steady, and professional demeanor can help reduce tension and promote a sense of safety for the child.
- Staff members should aim not only to manage their own stress signals, but also to recognize when tension between others may be affecting the child and take steps to help de-escalate the situation.



Strategies to Reduce Stress

- **Slow the pace of interactions:** Speak calmly and at a steady pace. Pausing conversations or allowing short breaks can help prevent tension from escalating.
- **Model calm body language:** Maintain relaxed posture, steady breathing, and a neutral tone of voice. Children and adults will often mirror the emotional cues they observe.
- **Reduce environmental stimulation:** Limiting noise, distractions, and unnecessary activity can help lower stress levels. Features such as soft lighting and offering sensory toys can also support emotional regulation.
- **Support co-regulation:** Offer reassurance, redirect attention when needed, and help guide interactions back to a calmer tone when tension rises.

WHY TRANSITIONS ARE HARD FOR CHILDREN IN SUPERVISED VISITATION

Why Transitions Are Difficult for Children

Transitions require children to do several challenging things at once:

- stop what they are doing
- shift their attention
- regulate emotions
- prepare for what comes next

Because children's executive functioning skills are still developing, these changes can feel overwhelming.



Why Transitions Are Even Harder in Child Welfare Context

Children involved in supervised visitation often experience transitions as signals of loss or uncertainty.

Many children have experienced:

- removal from caregivers
- placement changes
- school transitions
- uncertainty about living situations

Because of these experiences, transitions may activate a child's stress or survival responses.

How Uncertainty Affects Children

Children feel safest when they know what to expect.

Unpredictable environments can cause children to:

- remain on high alert
- worry about what will happen next
- experience increased stress during transitions

Predictable routines help children feel more secure and emotionally regulated.



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EMOTIONAL SPIKES DURING VISIT EXCHANGES



WHY EXCHANGES CAN BE INTENSE

Visit exchanges combine several stressful experiences at once:

- separation from a caregiver
- uncertainty about what comes next
- strong emotional reactions

Because of this, exchanges often activate both the stress system and attachment system.



SIGNS A CHILD MAY BE OVERWHELMED

Children who feel overwhelmed during visits may display stress responses that are often described as fight, flight, or freeze.

- **Fight** responses may include behaviors such as yelling, aggression, or defiance.
- **Flight** responses can appear as running away, hiding, or refusing to move.
- **Freeze** responses may involve going limp, becoming very quiet, or shutting down emotionally.

Children may also show physical or behavioral signs of stress, such as stomachaches or headaches, pacing or nervous energy, and repeatedly asking questions as they try to make sense of what is happening around them.

WHY CHILDREN MAY “FALL APART” AT THE END

It is common for children to appear calm during visits and then become upset at departure.

This can happen because children may:

- hold their emotions in during the visit
- try not to upset the caregiver
- release accumulated stress at the end

This response is often a delayed emotional release.



CREATING PREDICTABLE TRANSITION RITUALS

Why Predictable Routines Help

Predictable routines help children feel:

- safe
- prepared
- in control



When children know what to expect, they spend less energy scanning for threats and more energy engaging in the visit.

Simple Rituals That Create Stability

Small routines can act as emotional anchors.

Examples include:

- greeting the same way each visit
- sharing a snack before play
- a special goodbye phrase
- waving goodbye through the window

These rituals help children make sense of separation and maintain emotional continuity.



Structuring Transitions to Reduce Anxiety

Staff can help by:

- giving countdown warnings (“5 more minutes”)
- explaining what will happen next
- keeping instructions simple
- maintaining consistent visit structures

Preparing children while they are calm reduces the element of surprise.



PREVENTING POST-VISIT EMOTIONAL CRASHES

WHY CHILDREN MAY STRUGGLE AFTER VISITS

Some children work very hard to stay regulated during visits and release their emotions later.

Children may be experiencing:

- grief after separation
- loyalty conflicts
- confusion about family relationships
- emotional exhaustion

This can result in post-visit emotional crashes.

HOW PREPARATION HELPS

Providing predictable routines before, during, and after visits helps reduce uncertainty.

Helpful strategies include:

- previewing the visit schedule
- preparing children for goodbye
- explaining when they will see their caregiver again

Naming emotions can also help children understand their experiences.

Example:

“You might feel happy and also sad after seeing your mom.”

SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL RECOVERY AFTER VISITS

Helpful supports may include:

- calm caregiving
- quiet connection time
- physical activity to release energy
- comforting sensory experiences
- opportunities to talk or play through feelings

These supports help children process the emotional transition.

PRACTICAL STRATEGY

Transition Object

Children may benefit from keeping a small object that connects them to their caregiver.

Examples include:

- a favorite stuffed animal
- a photo
- a small comfort item

These objects help children maintain emotional continuity between visits.



HOW ADULT STRESS AFFECTS CHILDREN DURING VISITS

CHILDREN'S NERVOUS SYSTEMS RESPOND TO ADULT EMOTIONAL STATES

- Children are highly sensitive to the emotional tone of adults around them.
- Research shows that children depend heavily on caregivers to help regulate their emotional and physiological responses (Hastings et al., 2019).
- When caregivers are calm and responsive, children are more likely to develop healthy emotional regulation skills.
- When caregivers are overwhelmed or dysregulated, children may experience increased stress and emotional insecurity.

WHY CALM ADULTS HELP CHILDREN FEEL SAFE

- Sensitive and responsive caregiving helps children develop:
 - emotional regulation
 - physiological regulation
 - a sense of safety and belonging
- Research shows responsive parenting behaviors support children's developing ability to regulate emotions and stress (Hastings et al., 2019; Jones-Mason et al., 2023).

WHEN ADULT STRESS ESCALATES CHILD DISTRESS

- When adults display high stress or dysregulation during visits, children may experience:
 - fear or panic when approached by caregivers
 - self-blame or confusion about adult behavior
 - disruptions to their sense of safety and stability
- Trauma-informed research shows that adult dysregulation can undermine children's emotional security and internal working models of relationships (Hoffnung-Assouline & Knei-Paz, 2024).
- Children may begin to interpret relationships as unsafe or unpredictable.

QUICK STAFF REMINDER

- Children often borrow regulation from the adults around them.
- A calm adult presence can help a child's nervous system settle.

RECOGNIZING CHILDREN'S STRESS RESPONSES DURING VISITS

STRESS RESPONSES ARE SURVIVAL RESPONSES

When children experience stress or trauma reminders, their nervous system may activate protective responses.

These responses are commonly described as:

- Fight: arguing, yelling, hitting, defiance
- Flight: avoiding interaction, leaving the room, refusing activities
- Freeze: becoming quiet, withdrawn, or unresponsive
- Fawn: overly compliant behavior aimed at pleasing adults

These responses are not intentional misbehavior. They are automatic stress responses.

TRAUMA REMINDERS DURING VISITS

- Certain experiences during visits can trigger stress responses, including:
 - caregiver tone of voice
 - body language or facial expressions
 - conflict between adults
 - reminders of past traumatic events
 - unexpected changes in plans
- Research shows children may link current situations to past traumatic experiences (Hoffnung-Assouline & Knei-Paz, 2024).

DISTRESS VS. DEFIANCE

- When children feel threatened or overwhelmed, their attachment system becomes activated.
- Behaviors such as protest, withdrawal, or emotional outbursts may be signs of distress rather than intentional defiance (Jones-Mason et al., 2023).

PRACTICE SCENARIO

- A child begins yelling and pushing toys after their parent raises their voice.
- Possible explanation:
 - Defiance
 - Stress response triggered by emotional tone
 - Overstimulation or anxiety
- Trauma-informed practice encourages staff to consider stress responses first.

HOW STAFF CO-REGULATION STABILIZES VISITS

WHAT IS CO-REGULATION?

- Co-regulation occurs when a calm adult helps a child regulate their emotional state.
- Young children often cannot regulate stress independently and rely on supportive adults to help them settle (Hastings et al., 2019).

WHAT CO-REGULATION LOOKS LIKE DURING VISITS

- Staff can help stabilize visits by:
 - speaking slowly and calmly
 - lowering their voice
 - slowing the pace of interactions
 - modeling calm behavior
 - acknowledging the child's feelings
- These actions help signal safety to a child's nervous system.

WHY SLOWING DOWN HELPS

- When adults lower their voice and slow the pace of interactions, children's nervous systems can shift from a stress response into a calmer state.
- This helps children feel:
 - heard
 - supported
 - safe enough to reconnect

HELPFUL STAFF LANGUAGE

- Examples include:
 - "I see that you're feeling upset. Let's take a moment."
 - "We can slow down and take a breath."
 - "It's okay to have big feelings."

STAFF IMPACT

- A calm staff presence helps create a safe environment where children feel protected and prioritized.

Environmental Strategies That Support Nervous System Regulation



Why Environment Matters

Children's nervous systems respond not only to people, but also to their surroundings.

Unpredictable or stressful environments can increase emotional dysregulation and stress (Jones-Mason et al., 2023).

Environmental Factors That May Overwhelm Children

Children may feel stressed when visits include:

- unpredictable routines
- confusing expectations
- emotional tension between adults
- unexpected cancellations
- unclear explanations about visits

Missed visits or sudden changes can trigger feelings of rejection or abandonment for some children (Hoffnung-Assouline & Knei-Paz, 2024).

Environmental Strategies That Support Regulation

Staff can help reduce stress by:

- explaining visit expectations clearly
- maintaining predictable schedules
- using consistent routines
- preparing children for transitions
- maintaining calm, structured environments

Predictability promotes children's sense of safety and comfort (Hoffnung-Assouline & Knei-Paz, 2024).

Small Actions That Make a Big Difference

Examples include:

- greeting the child the same way each visit
- explaining what will happen next
- preparing children for goodbye transitions
- maintaining consistent visit structures

These predictable experiences help children feel safer and more emotionally regulated.

WHEN CHILDREN FEEL “CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE”

UNDERSTANDING LOYALTY CONFLICTS IN SUPERVISED VISITATION



WHAT IS A LOYALTY CONFLICT?

A loyalty conflict occurs when a child feels emotionally pulled between caregivers and believes they must protect, defend, or choose between them.

Children often describe feeling:

- “Caught in the middle”
- “Torn between parents”
- Responsible for keeping the peace

Research shows children feel caught when they are drawn into adult disagreements or asked to take sides between caregivers (Schrodt, 2025).

This dynamic is often referred to as parent-child triangulation, where a child becomes part of the conflict between adults instead of being protected from it.

Children in foster care or separated families may experience this even more strongly because they maintain relationships with multiple caregivers. These conflicts are associated with emotional distress and behavioral challenges (Dansey et al., 2018).

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR CHILDREN

Children rely on stable family relationships to feel emotionally safe.

Exposure to ongoing conflict between caregivers can threaten a child’s emotional security, increasing anxiety and uncertainty about family relationships (O’Hara et al., 2024).

Children may begin to worry that:

- Loving one parent will hurt the other
- Talking about one caregiver will upset the other
- Their actions will cause family conflict

Over time, this can create significant emotional stress.



WHEN CHILDREN FEEL “CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE”

UNDERSTANDING LOYALTY CONFLICTS IN SUPERVISED VISITATION



REFLECTION FOR VISITATION PROFESSIONALS

Think about a visit you recently observed.

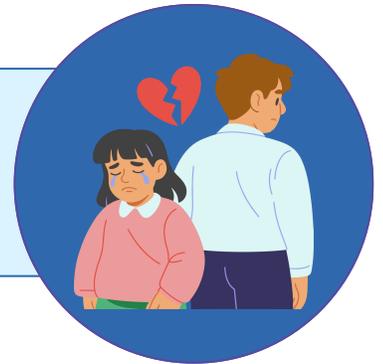
Did the child:

- Hesitate to talk about the other caregiver
- Look at the adult before answering questions
- Change the subject when family topics came up
- Become unusually quiet during certain conversations

These behaviors may reflect loyalty pressure, not defiance or withdrawal.

PRACTICE REMINDER

Children often stay quiet not because they have nothing to say, but because they are trying to protect someone.



LOYALTY PRESSURE IS OFTEN SUBTLE

Loyalty conflicts do not always involve arguments.

Children frequently experience invisible emotional pressure, subtle signals that make them feel responsible for protecting adults' feelings.

Children are highly sensitive to:

- tone of voice
- facial expressions
- emotional reactions

For example, if a caregiver becomes upset when the other parent is mentioned, a child may stop sharing positive experiences about that parent.

Children often silence themselves in order to avoid hurting someone's feelings (Dansey et al., 2018).

WHEN CHILDREN FEEL “CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE”

UNDERSTANDING LOYALTY CONFLICTS IN SUPERVISED VISITATION



EMOTIONAL PARENTIFICATION

When children feel responsible for managing adult emotions, this can lead to emotional parentification.

This occurs when children take on adult emotional roles such as:

- mediator between caregivers
- emotional supporter
- confidant for adult problems

Research shows emotional parentification can place significant psychological stress on children (Dariotis et al., 2023; Stanić, 2025).

STATEMENTS THAT CAN CREATE EMOTIONAL PRESSURE

Children may feel responsible when adults say things like:

- “Your dad doesn’t care about us.”
- “Tell me what happens at your mom’s house.”
- “If you loved me, you wouldn’t want to visit them.”

Even subtle comments can create emotional pressure.



SUPPORTIVE RESPONSES STAFF CAN MODEL

Visitation professionals can reduce emotional pressure by saying:

- “You don’t have to choose. It’s okay to care about both parents.”
- “You can share what feels comfortable to you.”
- “Your job is to be a kid.”

These statements reinforce an important boundary:
Adults manage adult problems. Children get to be children.

RECOGNIZING SIGNS A CHILD FEELS “IN THE MIDDLE”



EMOTIONAL SIGNS

Children experiencing loyalty conflicts may show:

- guilt when discussing one caregiver
- anxiety during family conversations
- hesitation when answering questions

BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

Staff may observe:

- avoiding questions about the other home
- changing the subject
- withdrawing during visits
- appearing overly cautious about what they say

Research shows children involved in parental triangulation often experience self-blame, loyalty conflicts, and reduced self-esteem (van Dijk et al., 2022).



BEHAVIORS OFTEN MISINTERPRETED

- Child avoids answering questions
- Child stays quiet
- Child refuses to talk about the other home

WHAT MAY BE HAPPENING

- Trying not to upset either parent
- Managing emotional pressure
- Protecting a caregiver’s feelings

Supervised visitation professionals help maintain a child-centered environment, support healthy parent-child relationships, and prevent children from being drawn into adult conflict—protecting children’s safety and emotional well-being (Brown & Brickman, 2018).

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month

Protective Factors: Building Safety During Supervised Visits

The Five Protective Factors

Parental resilience

The ability to cope with stress and recover from challenges.



Social connections

Support from friends, family, and community.



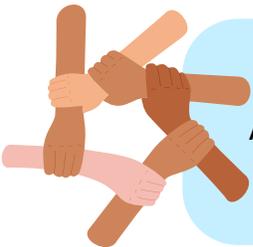
Knowledge of parenting and child development

Understanding what children need at different ages.



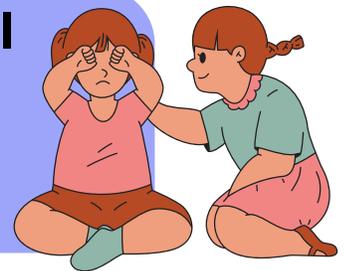
Concrete supports in times of need

Access to housing, food, transportation, counseling, and other resources.



Children's social and emotional competence

Children's ability to express feelings and build healthy relationships.



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Protective Factors: Building Safety During Supervised Visits

Why Protective Factors Matter

Protective factors are strengths that help reduce risk and support healthy development for children and families.

They are characteristics of individuals, families, and communities that help create safe, stable, and nurturing environments.

In supervised visitation settings, protective factors help:

- strengthen parent-child relationships
- reduce family stress
- support healthy development
- lower the risk of maltreatment over time

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020).

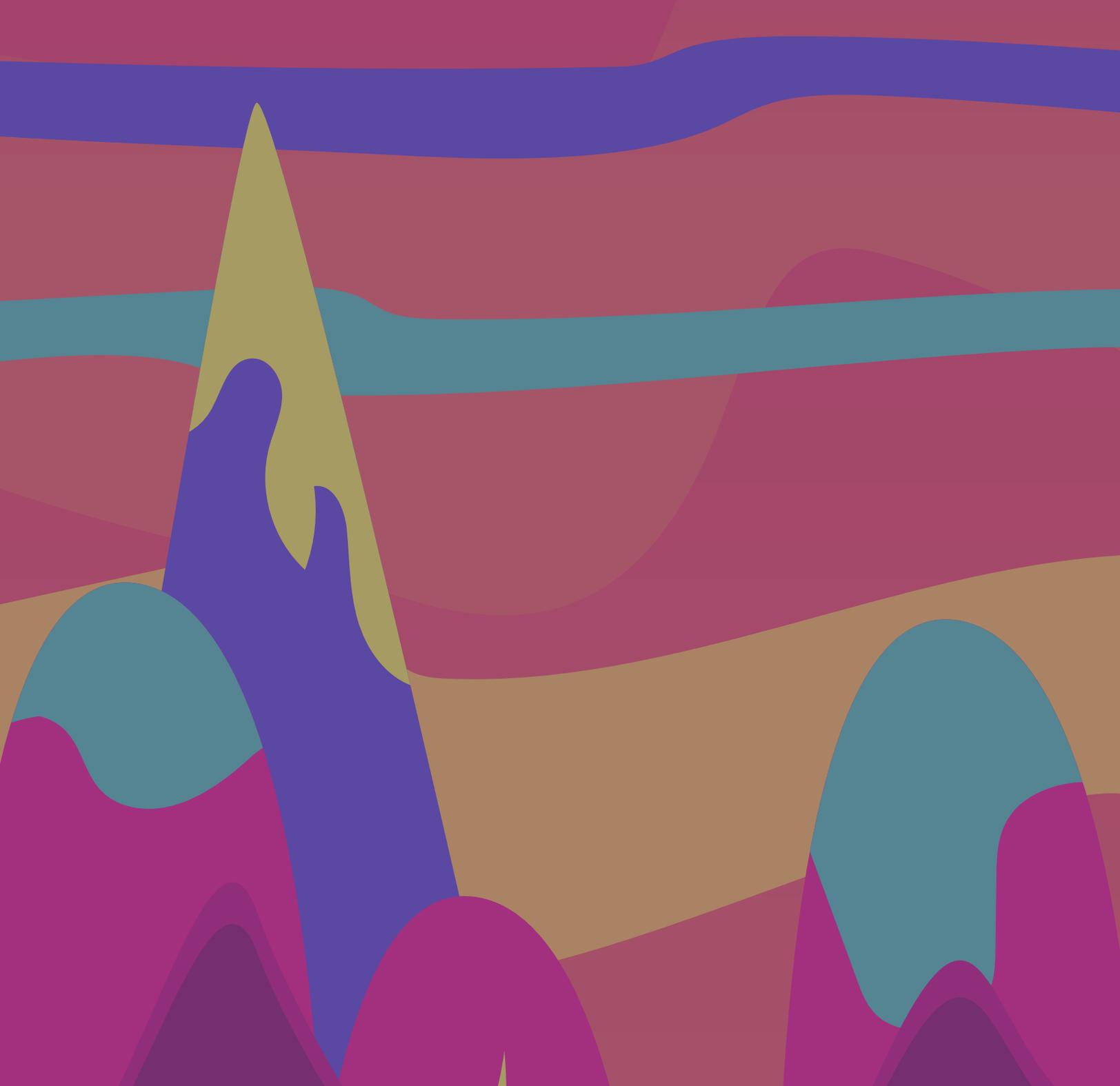
What This Looks Like During Visits

In supervised visitation settings, building protective factors often looks like: staff modeling calm interactions

- praising responsive caregiving
- supporting positive parent-child play
- connecting families to helpful resources
- encouraging nurturing communication

These small actions can help families build the strengths that support long-term safety and stability.





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