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An assessment of services for custodial parents during supervised visitation

Normajean Cefarelli[a,b]

[a]Doctoral School of Marriage and Family Therapy, Northcentral University, Prescott Valley, Arizona, USA; [b]Department of Applied Psychology, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University, New York, New York, USA

ABSTRACT

Supervised visitation programs provide court-mandated services in cases with purported risks to (a) child(ren), or during custody or visitation disputes. The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a need to provide support services for the custodial and/or foster parent during supervised visitation sessions. The researcher conducted a mixed methods study with a cross-sectional comparative design, using an internet-based simultaneous quantitative and qualitative needs assessment. Participants included custodial/foster parents, and visitation centers staff. Results indicated that custodial/foster parents share experiences of emotional stress, fear for their child(ren)'s safety during visitations, lack of coherence, and changes in the family dynamic. Resources of formal kinship; spouse/partner support; and information, logistical, mental health, and therapeutic support could help custodial/foster parents.

The purpose of nationwide supervised visitation programs is to provide court-mandated services in cases where there are purported risks to (a) child(ren) (Clark, 2013; Johnston & Straus, 2005; Maxwell & Oehme, 2004; Pulido et al., 2011). Such risks could include child abuse, neglect, or exposure to domestic violence; parental absenteeism due to incarceration, drug addiction, or mental illness; or custody or visitation disputes regarding the safety of the child (Clark, 2013; Johnston & Straus, 2005; Maxwell & Oehme, 2004; Pulido et al., 2011; Stern & Oehme, 2002; Stolberg et al., 2002). Essentially, supervised visitation programs are intended to provide the parents and children a chance to connect in a safe environment.

Supervised visitation

The Supervised Visitation Network (SVN) was formed in 1992 and currently consists of 500 visitation programs and approximately 700 members

CONTACT Normajean Cefarelli ✉ normajean@balancewithinllc.com Department of Applied Psychology, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University, New York, NY, USA.

across the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Africa, and Great Britain (J. Nullet, personal communication, April 7, 2015). The main purpose of supervised visitation programs is to provide children with a neutral and safe environment that allows access to the non-custodial parent (Pulido et al., 2011). Visitation programs also help to reunite family members and assist non-custodial parents in gaining the parenting tools needed to regain custody of and repair relationships with their child(ren) (McWey & Mullis, 2004).

Studies have provided evidence that visitation programs can aid both parents and children in navigating the stresses of separation, shifts in familial structures, feelings of alienation, and provide children with a link to their non-custodial parent (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005; Dunn et al., 2004; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Programs offer different types of supervised visitation sessions, such as one-on-one, therapeutic supervised visitation, and group supervision, all of which can be beneficial to all concerned parties (Pulido et al., 2011). Through these programs, custodial/foster parents can sometimes access counseling, support groups, and legal services, which could greatly benefit the reconciliation process and aid them in providing good care to the child(ren) in their custody (López et al., 2013; Shepard & Hagemeister, 2013).

However, there is a tendency for this particular group to either not access such available resources or find little benefit from the programs (Johnston & Straus, 2005; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Nesmith, 2015). This may be due to the majority of studies regarding visitation programs revolving around children and non-custodial parents (Boyle, 2017; Mignon & Ransford, 2012; Oehme & Stern, 2014; Ordway et al., 2015; Picot, 2016). Studies have dealt with how visitations can rebuild non-custodial parent-child relationships, with little to no discussion of the effects of visitation on custodial/foster parents (Mignon & Ransford, 2012; Oehme & Stern, 2014). While there are various resources available to custodial/foster parents in relation to visitations, there is still limited knowledge of how this group perceives visitation or experience and access the process and relevant resources (Brown et al., 2014, 2016; Esaki et al., 2012; Van Andel et al., 2015). This study aimed to fill this particular gap.

Filling this custodial/foster parent research gap is important, as researchers have indicated the value of visitation for all parties. Visitations can provide the child with a sense of identity and link to their culture, which can aid in their holistic growth (Atwool, 2013; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2015; Salas Martínez et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2014). Visitations with their non-custodial parent can also aid children in proactively dealing with the possible abuse, neglect, or other issues that caused the separation and need for

visitation in the first place (Clark, 2013; Johnston & Straus, 2005; López et al., 2013; Maxwell & Oehme, 2004).

Visitation programs can allow the custodial co-parent, who may have been subjected to trauma, to gain ways of overcoming the negative impacts of such, through measured and supervised interactions with the non-custodial parent (Clark, 2013; Pulido et al., 2011; Stern & Oehme, 2002). However, there are indications that custodial/foster parents can often negate the potentially positive visitation process by denying or limiting visitation opportunities, and/or experiencing increased levels of stress or anxiety that could negatively impact the child's visitation experience (Buchbinder, 2015; Gardner, 2002; Mignon & Ransford, 2012; Morrison et al., 2011; Salas Martínez et al., 2016; Spielfogel et al., 2011). As visitation programs can hold many benefits, it is important to mitigate potential undermining of the process (Buchbinder, 2015; Miron et al., 2013; Salas Martínez et al., 2016; Taplin & Mattick, 2014).

In order to do so, it is important to begin to understand the perceptions and experiences of custodial/foster parents regarding visitation, as well as their accessing of additional resources. If they do have access to additional resources, it is essential to understand the effect such resources have on their ability to successfully navigate visitation for both themselves and their children (Birnbaum & Alaggia, 2006; Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005; Dunn et al., 2004; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). The current lack of literature in this regard means that programs may be insufficiently addressing the specific needs of custodial/foster parents (Johnston & Straus, 2005; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Nesmith, 2015). This study aimed to address this particular issue by answering various research questions related to custodial/foster parents' perceptions, needs, and experiences regarding visitation.

Supervised visitation is a delicate and complex process and is always based on compromise (Birnbaum & Alaggia, 2006; Dunn et al., 2004; Pulido et al., 2011; Stern & Oehme, 2002). The nature of the supervised visitation environment naturally creates tension, with conflicting parental goals, parental animosity, and children caught in the middle of adult conflict (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005; Hakvoort et al., 2012). Visitation programs are, thus, only stopgap solutions designed to assist struggling families with navigating an eventual unsupervised visitation agreement between the custodial/foster and non-custodial parent and finding positive outcomes for all parties (Birnbaum & Alaggia, 2006; McWey & Mullis, 2004). Programs should provide means for improving parental approaches and relationships between each other and their children, and lowering children's stress levels (Toren et al., 2013). A key component in achieving such results is ensuring that custodial/foster parents' needs are met as part

of visitation considerations. This study aimed to bring to light custodial/ foster parent concerns and experiences to improve programs and potentially gain higher rates of visitation and reconciliation success.

Theoretical foundation

The Double ABCX Model is a strength-based model originally developed by Reuben Hill, (1958) and added to by McCubbin and Patterson (1983). The model focuses on the short- and longer-term pre- and post-crisis family dynamic. The model assumes that families have strengths and resources that can be utilized during a crisis, and which will, in turn, reduce disorder and increase the likelihood of adaptation (Plunkett et al., 1997). These resources are psychological in nature but can be reinforced and supported by outside agents (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). McCubbin and Patterson (1983) included four post-crisis variables: (aA) pile-up (stressors as a result of the crisis); (bB) existing and possible new resources; (cC) the perception of the problem (both negative and positive); (xX) adaptation (maladaptation or failed adaptation; or bonadaptation or successful). The crisis is the event of separation. The four factors are variables found from case to case and across time. These variables are interdependent. For example, a family could acquire resources over time (such as counseling or therapy), which would increase their adaptation (X) and affect their perception (C) (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). The researcher used this model to explore existing symptoms found in parental structure change in order to assist custodial/foster parents to reach bonadaptation. The framework also provided a better understanding of what kinds of strategies visitation centers might put in place to support parents within this changing parental structure. experiences. The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a need to provide support services for the custodial/foster parent during supervised visitation sessions. The researcher investigated the perspectives of supervised visitation staff with regard to the crisis and pile-up stressors experienced by custodial/foster parents, resources used by the custodial/foster parent to minimize the effects of the stressors, custodial/foster parent's perceptions of the initial crisis, hardships that led to the pile-up, and the means by which the custodial/foster parent makes meaning of the family situation. The researcher also examined the custodial/foster parent's response to the stressors and his/her adaptation to the situation over time. Using a needs assessment analysis and a mixed methods research design, the researcher explored the status of custodial/foster care parents' access to necessary information and the types of services they need to cope with their situation.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a descriptive, cross-sectional design and an internet-based Qualtrics survey, to answer the following overarching research question: What are custodial/foster parents' perceptions and experiences of visitation, and how can such programs better meet their needs? To that end, the following sub-research questions were developed: RQ1. What are the crises and pile-up stressors experienced by custodial/foster parents who attend supervised visitation sessions?; RQ2. What are the resources used by custodial/foster parents to minimize the effects of their crises and pile-up stressors?; RQ3. What are the custodial/foster parents' perceptions on the initial crises and the hardships that lead to the pile-up stressors?; RQ4. What are the custodial/foster parents' responses to the stressors of their situation?; RQ5. What is the actual need in the field for providing support services for custodial/foster parents during supervised visitation sessions?; RQ6. What additional support services would you like to see for custodial/foster parents during supervised visitation sessions?; andRQ7. What has changed if anything since attending supervised visitation?

Method

Participants

There are 549 SVN organizations worldwide. Through the SVN website, the researcher obtained the contact details for 511 organizations based in the U.S. The researcher recruited key staff members from these organizations via email, while the researcher recruited target parent groups from three organizations located in Vermont, Connecticut, and California. The same survey was sent to two separate samples: 1) nationwide members of the Supervised Visitation Network (SVN); and 2) custodial/foster parents in Vermont, Connecticut, and California.

The researcher recruited SVN staff members from various visitation centers across the country by sending an IRB approved email to potential study participants. Participant email addresses were obtained from SVN public website listing. Then, the researcher contacted the aforementioned organizations by sending a letter asking the administration to help recruit study participants by sending out the invitations through email to the staff members of the supervised visitation program. In order for staff member participants to be eligible for the study, they had to work in any of the following capacities within the supervised visitation program: 1) directly observe supervised visitation sessions, 2) answer the phones for the center, and/or 3) interact with the custodial/foster and non-custodial parents, such as greeting the parents before, during, and/or after visits. These criteria were selected to ensure that the researcher would gain a wide and relevant

sample of members who had direct interaction with, and could therefore speak to the experiences and processes followed by custodial/foster parents at the center.

The researcher recruited custodial/foster parents by contacting supervision sites in Vermont, Connecticut, and California and obtained written permission to invite parents to participate in the study. The organizations placed an IRB approved flyer in their clinic in clear view of parents. If parents chose to participate, they were able to either take a picture of the flyer with the web address on it, use the QR code, or ask for a copy of the flyer.

Upon entering the Qualtrics survey site, participants were directed to an informed consent form before being able to complete the survey. In order to continue through the study, a respective force response and skip logic was set where if participants clicked "agree", they would be sent to the survey, but if they clicked "disagree" they would be forwarded directly to the end of the study. To increase survey participation, the researcher offered an incentive of a random draw for one of five $50.00 gift certificates for Amazon.com.

Sample

Given the descriptive nature of the study, there was no target sample size for the study. Instead, the researcher designated a data collection period of six weeks to recruit participants for the study. The researcher used a purposive (convenience) sampling strategy by focusing recruitment efforts on a specific population of individuals who met criteria relevant to the purpose of the study (Yang & Banamah, 2014). The final study sample consisted of 80 staff members and five custodial/foster parents.

For the purpose of this study, custodial parents are defined as the parent who has physical custody of the child/ren and is bringing them for visitation with the non-custodial parent. The foster parents are defined as being assigned by child protective services and/or the court to temporarily care for the child/ren. They also bring the child/ren to supervised visitation center to visit with the biological parent(s). The non-custodial parent is the parent who has a visitation schedule with his or her children and visits with them at a supervised visitation center.

Demographics

The 80 staff members represented supervised visitation experiences from 31 states, including, but not limited to: California, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, New York, South Dakota, and Vermont. A majority ($n = 50$;

62.50%) of the sample responded that self-referred, court referred, and local department for child and family services were all reasons for referral for supervised visitation of the staff members. All but five of the 80 staff members were female. The majority (67; 84.8%) of the 80 staff members were White/Caucasian, 5 (6.30%) were African American and 5 (6.30%) were Hispanic. The number of staff members by age were 20 (25.60%), aged 35 to 44 years old, 20 (25.60%) aged 45 to 54 years old, and 21 (26.90%) aged 55 to 64 years old. The majority of the 80 staff members had a tertiary education with either a 4-year college degree (33; 41.30%) or Master's degree (26; 32.50%). For the length of time the child(ren) typically attend supervised visitation, participants could choose more than one category. Based on the data gathered, staff members noted the length of time a child typically attended supervised visitation ranged from 4 to 6 months (25; 30.5%), 7 to 9 months (21; 25.6%), or 10 to 12 months (21; 25.6%).

The five custodial/foster parents were relatively evenly representative of the three chosen states: Vermont (1; 20%), Connecticut (2; 40%), and California (2; 40%). Four (80%) out of five custodial/foster parents responded that the reason for their supervised visitation was because of being court referred. Four (80%) of the five custodial/foster parents were females and White/Caucasians, and there was one Hispanic (20%). Three custodial/foster parents were aged 35 to 44 years old (60%), one was aged 25 to 34, and one was aged 45 to 54 years old. The education of the five custodial/foster parents included one (20%) some college, one (20%) 2-year college degree, one (20%) 4-year college degree, and two (40%) Master's degree. For the length of time the child(ren) of these parents had been attending supervised visitation, one each responded 1 to 3 months, 4 to 6 months, 7 to 9 months, 10 to 12 months, and more than 1 year.

Procedures

The online Qualtrics survey collected data through both qualitative and quantitative needs assessment. A needs assessment measures "what is" and "what should be" and delineates "discrepancies targeted for action" (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010, pp. 3-4). For the purpose of this study, the researcher determined that key informants (i.e. staff members at supervised visitation centers) and target groups (i.e. custodial/foster parents at visitation centers) were the most appropriate participants for this study. Because needs assessment studies describe, "what is" in order to determine "what should be" (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010, p. 3), the researcher used a descriptive, cross-sectional study design. A descriptive study is purely observational; collecting information without changing the environment (Hall & Jurow, 2015). Cross-sectional designs are used when researchers

have a one-time interaction with groups of people (Liang, 2014). The mixed methods, descriptive, cross-sectional nature of the study provided information about the current status, behavior, attitudes, and other characteristics of the custodial/foster parent group under investigation (Jenkins et al., 2014).

Measures

To collect the data, the researcher composed the survey instrument out of six quantitative modules and one qualitative module. These modules each measured a specific aspect or variable, in answer to the respective posed research questions and presented Double ABCX Model. It took participants a maximum of 30 minutes to complete the survey.

Demographics

Support staff answered questions regarding their race, gender, state, referral source (i.e. court, DCF, self), typical length of visitations (i.e. months, year, etc.), and level of education. Parents answered questions on their state, place of visitation, age, gender, race, level of education, referral source (i.e. court, DCF, self), and how long their child/children typically attend(s) visits (i.e. months, year, etc.). All participants could select from a specific set of choices per item. All variables measured in this survey were operationalized as categorical variables.

Crisis and pile-up stressors

Crises

Staff members were asked to indicate the frequency with which they encountered researcher-listed crisis situations, based on a 5-point Likert type scale (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Frequently, 5 = Very Frequently). Participants could select from the following crises options: child abuse, neglect, divorce, exposure to domestic violence, incarceration of non-custodial parent, drug addiction of non-custodial parent, mental illness of non-custodial parent, and/or inappropriate sexual behavior of non-custodial parent. Parents were asked to identify which of the presented crisis resulted in their inclusion in the supervised visitation program. The researcher created this measure based on the literature reviewed that indicated the presented crises as often being associated with visitation programs (Hakvoort et al., 2012; Johnston & Straus, 2005; Maxwell & Oehme, 2004; Nesmith et al., 2017; Pulido et al., 2011; Stern & Oehme, 2002; Stolberg et al., 2002).

Pile-up stressors

Staff members had to evaluate the likelihood of researcher-listed pile-up stressors affecting the custodial/foster parent using a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 5 (extremely likely). Parents had to evaluate the effect of these stressors on their life as a result of the original crisis that necessitated supervised visitation using a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1 (low effect) to 5 (high effect). The list of pile-up stressors was: changes in the family dynamic, negative effects on parent-child relationship, shift in parental responsibilities, emotional stress, physical stress, conflict with non-custodial parent, time conflict with supervised visitation schedule, and social isolation. The researcher identified these pile-up stressors in the literature, thereby substantiating their validity as possible measures (Johnston & Straus, 2005; Maxwell & Oehme, 2004; Pulido et al., 2011; Stern & Oehme, 2002; Stolberg et al., 2002).

These researcher-created portions of the study instrument were field tested for validity in relation to the purpose of the study and the research questions. The faculty members were from the institution that has a supervised visitation clinic, where the researcher also currently works as a teacher. The faculty members were 15 licensed marriage and family therapists who are considered experts in the field. The field testers evaluated the instruments based on the clarity of the questions and its relevance and effectiveness in collecting the data necessary to address the research questions of the study. The researcher made corrections and adjustments based on the feedback from the field test to enhance the validity of the study instruments. The field testers were not participants of the study.

Family support scale (FSS)

FSS is a preexisting 19-item questionnaire used to identify the perceived resources made available to a family during a crisis (Dunst et al., 1984). This section of the survey was aimed at both staff members and parents, where they had to indicate how helpful they perceive the various individuals, groups, and agencies have been for the custodial/foster parents. Within this instrument, there are five subscales identified through factor analysis: informal kinship, spouse/partner support, social organizations, formal kinship, and professional services. The respondents evaluated the helpfulness of the identified sources using a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1 (not at all helpful) to 5 (extremely helpful).

Family sense of coherence scale (FSOC) and family adaptation scale (FAS)

The researcher created this scale by combining two preexisting measures: the 26-item 7-point FSOC scale and the 10-item 7-point FAS designed by

Sarenmalm et al. (2013) and Corcoran and Fischer (2013) respectively. These authors both created their scales from the orignal FAS and FSOC scales designed by Antonovsky and Sourani, (1988). This section of the survey targeted both custodial/foster parents and staff members; requiring them to indicate to what extent they found current situation as comprehensive, controllable and coherent (FSOC), and their family adaptability (FAS). High scores on the FSOC scale indicated a strong sense of coherence, while low scores on the FAS indicated a strong sense of satisfaction.

Family crisis oriented personal evaluation scales (F-COPES)

This preexisting instrument had 30 items used to measure the coping and adaptation strategies of the custodial/foster parent (Greef & Nolting, 2013). It was originally developed by McCubbin, Larsen, and Olsen in 1985 (F-COPES, 1985). Both staff members and parents had to select their answers based on their perceptions of familial coping behaviors and problem-solving strategies used during times of crisis. This instrument used a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) in relation to the following coping strategies: 1) acquiring social support, 2) reframing, 3) seeking spiritual support, 4) mobilizing to acquire and accept help, and 5) passive appraisal (Lima-Rodriguez et al., 2015).

Qualitative open-ended questions

The last section of the survey used qualitative open-ended survey questions to elicit in-depth responses from both staff members and parents regarding their perceptions on the need for support services for custodial/foster parents during supervised visitation sessions. The qualitative questions included the following: RQ1. What is the actual need in the field for providing support services for custodial/foster parents?; RQ2. What additional support services would you like to see for custodial/foster parent?; RQ3. What has changed, if anything, since they began attending supervised visitation?

These questions were created by the researcher after a review of the literature and a panel panel reviewed and confirmed question's validity.

Analysis

The researcher used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v. 22.0 to analyze the quantitative data. Frequency tables and cross-tabulation were used to analyze crisis and pile-up stressors through descriptive statistics. This allowed the researcher to establish the crises encountered by both sample populations, and the likelihood of these stressors affecting

custodial/foster parents. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze data related to the FSS instrument, with higher scores denoting that certain resources were more helpful than others. Descriptive statistics was also to analyze data related to the FSOC and FAS models to determine the extent to which the custodial/foster parent sample saw their current situation as comprehensive and controllable, and the level to which they could adapt to their situation. Finally, descriptive statistics was used to analyze data related to the F-COPES measure to better determine the kinds of services and coping mechanisms both staff members and parents perceive as useful, or actively employ for dealing with a crisis.

NVivo 11 was used to conduct thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected. Thematic analysis is defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The researcher followed Braun and Clarke (2006) six steps for thematic analysis: 1) familiarization with the data; 2) generation of initial codes; 3) search for themes; 4) review of themes; 5) definition and naming of themes; and 6) production of the final report. The researcher then compared the qualitative findings to the quantitative results to identify points of commonality and divergence. While the results of the quantitative analysis were a priority, the results from the qualitative data analysis supplemented the results from the quantitative portion, converging the results of the two sets of analysis during the interpretation of the data. This allowed the researcher to better establish the viewpoints from both sample populations and gain more depth of understanding into issues around custodial/foster parents' needs and views in relation to supervised visitation.

Results

Please note that the researcher provided the study survey to two separate population groups, SVN staff members and custodial/foster parents involved in supervised visitation. The survey prompted each group's answers differently, with parents answering from personal experience, and staff members basing their answers on their knowledge of visitation families in general. Due to both these groups answering the same survey, the researcher represented the results as an average of the combined answers, to provide a clearer overview of the issue. The qualitative portion of the results will be presented separately and identified as staff member's responses and parent responses. Tables and in-text descriptions were used to differentiate between what staff members and parents answered easier. Findings for Research Questions 1 to 4 all relate to the quantitative section of this study, while findings for Research Questions 5 to 7 are related to the qualitative section.

Table 1. Cross tabulation of crises experienced by Custodial/Foster who attend supervised visitation.

		N	%
Drug addiction of non-custodial parent	Staff	78	97.50%
	Parent	3	60.00%
	Total	81	95.30%
Exposure to domestic violence	Staff	77	97.50%
	Parent	2	40.00%
	Total	79	94.00%
Mental illness of non-custodial parent	Staff	76	96.20%
	Parent	2	40.00%
	Total	78	92.90%
Child abuse	Staff	75	93.80%
	Parent	3	60.00%
	Total	78	91.80%
Neglect	Staff	73	92.40%
	Parent	2	40.00%
	Total	75	89.30%
Divorce or separation	Staff	65	81.30%
	Parent	1	20.00%
	Total	66	77.60%
Inappropriate sexual behavior of non-custodial parent	Staff	63	79.70%
	Parent	1	20.00%
	Total	64	76.20%
Incarceration of non-custodial parent	Staff	58	73.40%
	Parent	1	20.00%
	Total	59	70.20%

Research question 1

Results indicated that both staff members and custodial/foster parents found drug addiction of non-custodial parent (staff 97.50%; parents 60%), exposure to domestic violence (staff 97.50%; parents 40%), mental illness of non-custodial parent (staff 96.20%; parents 40%), child abuse (staff 93.80%; parents 60%), and neglect (staff 92.40%; parents 40%) to be the main reasons for supervised visitation. Table 1 provides a breakdown of each sample population's responses and representational percentages.

Both participant groups also had to evaluate the likelihood of the pile-up stressors affecting custodial/foster parents, using a 5-point Likert type scale. The higher sample populations rated a pile-up stressor, the more likely they believed such a stressor could affect these parents. Stressors included changes in family dynamic; negative effects on parent-child relationship; shift in parental responsibilities; emotional stress; physical stress; conflict with non-custodial parent; and time conflict with supervised visitation schedules. Average results for this part of the survey indicated that emotional stress ($M = 4.76$; $SD = 0.60$), conflict with non-custodial parent ($M = 4.57$; $SD = 0.81$), and changes in family dynamic ($M = 4.52$; $SD = 0.71$) were the more likely pile-up stressors affecting the life of custodial/foster parent as a result of the original crisis that necessitated supervised visitation. Time conflict with supervised visitation schedules ($M = 3.88$; $SD = 0.98$) and negative effects on parent-child relationship

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of FSS subscales scores during supervised visitation and prior to supervised visitation between staff and parents.

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Formal kinship (during supervised visitation)	Staff	79	2.35	0.90
	Parent	5	3.20	2.08
	Total	84	2.40	1.01
Spouse/partner support (during supervised visitation)	Staff	79	2.02	0.93
	Parent	5	1.87	1.56
	Total	84	2.01	0.97
Informal support (during supervised visitation)	Staff	79	1.55	0.87
	Parent	5	1.93	1.61
	Total	84	1.57	0.92
Social organizations (during supervised visitation)	Staff	79	1.20	0.95
	Parent	5	1.45	0.33
	Total	84	1.22	0.92
Professional services (during supervised visitation)	Staff	79	2.06	1.07
	Parent	5	2.55	0.80
	Total	84	2.09	1.05
Formal kinship (prior to supervised visitation)	Staff	75	1.82	1.15
	Parent	5	2.80	2.20
	Total	80	1.88	1.24
Spouse/partner support (prior to supervised visitation)	Staff	75	1.60	1.09
	Parent	5	2.13	1.32
	Total	80	1.64	1.10
Informal support (prior to supervised visitation)	Staff	75	1.25	1.00
	Parent	5	1.60	1.50
	Total	80	1.27	1.03
Social organizations (prior to supervised visitation)	Staff	75	1.05	1.02
	Parent	5	1.40	0.49
	Total	80	1.07	1.00
Professional services (prior to supervised visitation)	Staff	75	1.74	1.17
	Parent	5	2.15	1.02
	Total	80	1.77	1.16

($M = 4.00$; $SD = 1.02$) were the least likely pile-up stressors affecting the life of custodial/foster parent. However, parental responses indicated generally higher mean scores across all categories, with parents rating shifts in parental responsibilities ($M = 5.60$; $SD = 0.55$) and emotional stress ($M = 5.60$; $SD = 0.55$) the highest.

Research question 2

Both the staff member and parent samples received descriptions of resources and support offered to custodial/foster parents. The respondents evaluated the helpfulness of the identified sources using a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1 (not at all helpful) to 5 (extremely helpful). Higher mean scores indicated that a certain resource is more helpful to the custodial/foster parents. Table 2 presents a breakdown of these resources and their perceived helpfulness according to each population sample.

While both populations deemed some resources helpful (e.g. spouse/partner support during visitation $M = 2.01$ or social organizations $M = 1.22$), there tended to be a discrepancy regarding what staff members and parents found most helpful to custodial/foster parents. For example, parents rated

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of FSOC and FAS scores between staff and parents.

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
FSOC	Staff	77	3.98	0.76
	Parent	5	5.38	0.47
	Total	82	4.07	0.82
FAS	Staff	72	4.09	0.45
	Parent	5	4.20	0.37
	Total	77	4.10	0.45

both formal kinship during supervised visitation ($M = 3.20$ versus $M = 2.35$) and professional services prior to supervised visitation ($M = 2.15$ versus $M = 1.74$) as far more helpful than staff members did. On average, parents rated all resources more helpful than staff members, indicating a clear need for all presented resources to be made available to parents, even if staff have not found certain resources to be as helpful. However, due to the low response rate of only 5 parents, it may be possible that all resources are not as helpful as this study indicates, and further research identifying specific resources or confirming that all resources are helpful is needed in future.

Research question 3

Both population samples also responded to survey questions regarding custodial/foster parents' perceptions on the initial crises and the hardships that lead to the pile-up stressors. Items that scored higher on the FSOC scale indicated better levels of coherence and that parents see their current situation as comprehensive and controllable. Items that scored higher on the FAS indicated a stronger sense of parental adaptation to internal and external environments. Results indicated that parents experienced an average to low sense of coherence, control, and adaptability with average mean scores of between 4.07 and 4.10. Table 3 provides more detail regarding both staff and parental perceptions in this area.

Research question 4

Results from data collected regarding custodial/foster parents' responses to the stressors of their situation indicated that parents found reframing their situation to be especially important for responding positively to their situation ($M = 4.02$), while staff members rated this response much lower ($M = 2.96$). This difference in perception between the two sample populations is indicative of some of the discrepancies in how and why certain services are currently available but not necessarily utilized or beneficial to custodial/foster parents. Both sample populations indicated that acquiring social support (staff $M = 3.31$; parents $M = 3.49$), passive appraisal (staff

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of F-COPES subscales scores between staff and parents.

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Acquiring social support	Staff	74	3.31	0.63
	Parent	5	3.49	0.84
	Total	79	3.32	0.64
Reframing	Staff	73	2.96	0.74
	Parent	5	4.02	0.88
	Total	78	3.02	0.79
Seeking spiritual support	Staff	72	2.92	0.73
	Parent	5	2.85	1.34
	Total	77	2.91	0.77
Mobilizing to acquire and accept help	Staff	73	3.12	0.85
	Parent	5	3.70	0.54
	Total	78	3.16	0.84
Passive appraisal	Staff	72	3.33	0.65
	Parent	5	2.45	0.45
	Total	77	3.28	0.67

$M = 3.33$; parents $M = 2.45$), and mobilizing to acquire and accept help (staff $M = 3.12$; parents $M = 3.70$) could all assist custodial/foster parents to respond positively to the supervised visitation situation. Table 4 presents more information in this regard.

Research question 5

Both the staff member and parent sample populations provided answers for the first open-ended qualitative question related to support services needed for custodial/foster parent's in field. Two main themes emerged from these population group's answers. Firstly, both staff members and parents highlighted the need for information and logistical support services. These services included funding, transportation, information, service referrals, and support services for and during the supervised visits.

Staff responses

A staff member noted that services such as information and logistical support could assist custodial/foster parents in better "understanding that help is available to them". Other staff members also believed that supervised visitations were stressful due to parents not knowing how to comply with court-mandated visitations, what kinds of processes they might encounter during visitations or how to navigate such, or what may be expected of them aside from simply bringing the child to the supervised visitation venue. These participants noted that improving communication and providing parents with information and education in these regards could be beneficial.

Staff members also highlighted how custodial/foster parents needed to be informed and aware of their child(ren)'s safety during visitations. One participant noted that improved financial resources for both parents and

visitation centers could ensure children's safety. The participant especially noted improving finances for "police officers, monitor (audio and visual), sufficient staff, modifications as needed to the physical environment (i.e., automatic locks on doors)". Staff members also believed that allowing visitation centers the finances and resources to assist custodial/foster parents with transport for their children to and from their visitations, as well as being more flexible and accommodating toward familial and work schedules could also be of great help in lowering these parents' stress and improving the overall visitation experience.

The staff sample also presented the need for environmental and professional support services. One staff member stated that custodial/foster parents needed reassurance that their child(ren) would be safe and protected during supervised visits with the non-custodial parent. Another staff member indicated:

> Custodial parents bring a significant level of anxiety to the process. They need assurance and support about the safety of the children, that conflict will be managed and mitigated, that their concerns are given credence and acknowledgement of the burden of responsibility they carry in child-rearing.

Staff members believed that it was possible to mitigate the stresses and concerns expressed in custodial/foster parents through therapeutic support and knowing that their child(ren) is in a safe environment upon entering the visitation center. Staff members also indicated that custodial/foster parents needed assistance in understanding that these visits were good for their children and not punishment for anything they have done badly as parents. Parents knowing that well-trained and neutral staff work at the visitation center could also establish a safe environment. Staff members believed that training parents in co-parenting, poverty alleviation, and goal-setting could assist both custodial/foster and non-custodial parents in navigating visitations and improving their children's experiences during such. Staff members also noted that parents needed training in how to behave civilly to one another and appreciate their child(ren)'s need for the other parent in their lives.

Staff members noted that custodial/foster parents needed to learn that visitation center staff were a resource. As one staff member responded: "… the custodial parents sometimes aim their aggression at the monitors instead of looking at them as a resource". Staff responses indicated their belief that individual and family therapy could be of great assistance. One staff member stated: "I think the court gives the custodial parent not much control. I know that some parents need to be monitored but a lot don't and need more intervention instead of punishing them." Providing therapy to the different parties could assist in families returning to a more normal environment, lead to fewer instances of the child(ren) needing to choose

between their parents, and overall familial healing. Staff members noted, however, that there were few therapy opportunities available at their centers currently.

Staff members also highlighted how support groups could aid custodial/ foster care parents. Staff members indicated that giving parents access to others who are in similar situations could lower their stress levels. Parents would also then be better able to deal with the emotional toll and perceived alienation or abandonment by their child(ren) during visitations with the non-custodial parent, when they have people to talk to. Staff members noted that support groups could be a good supplement to professional therapy.

Parent responses

Parent respondents highlighted how they wished to receive family and parenting education. Parents also highlighted how custodial/foster parents needed to be informed and aware of their child(ren)'s safety during visitations and "greater flexibility." One parent stated what would be helpful is "transportation, a place to sit besides the lobby, classes offered during visit hours". Providing the parent with a comfortable place to sit away from the visiting parent might reduce stress and increase their likelihood of participating in educational or parenting programs during visitation. Additionally, offering greater flexibility around visiting hours for parents who work may yield an increase in visitation attendance.

Similarly, to staff responses, parents indicated their belief that individual and family therapy could be of great assistance. Parents noted that support groups could be a good supplement to professional therapy. One parent stated, "support group for others going through the same process would be helpful to ensure a feeling of safety and support". Parent participants also expressed a need for assistance in how to properly prepare both themselves and their child(ren) for visitation. Perhaps a formal orientation as well as ongoing informative sessions for the parent would be helpful.

In all, results from responses to the fifth research question indicated that both population samples believed that supervised visitation could offer opportunities for helping custodial/foster and non-custodial parents receive the support services they need to normalize family relationships, reduce stress, and improve outcomes for families and children.

Research question 6

Findings for what additional support services custodial/foster parents needed during supervised visitations, according to both parents and staff members, revealed an overlap with some of the suggestions and perceptions

presented for the fifth research question. This was specifically evident in the repeated themes of education and mental health services, and logistics and information. Additional themes of boundaries and expectations, and delivery and management of supervised visitation were also found. Therefore, due to the similar findings and overlap in themes, these findings have been combined.

Both staff members and parents responded that boundaries, in terms of court mandates regarding who is present during a supervised visit, and strategies for maintaining child safety were important. Both participant groups also repeated calls for the aid and education of parents to prepare themselves and their child(ren) for visitation. Both participant groups highlighted how keeping custodial/foster parents informed throughout their child(ren)'s visitation through "check in reports" and providing on-site therapy sessions for parents while they wait for their child's visitation to end could be helpful to custodial/foster parents. One staff member maintained that keeping strict boundaries or separation between custodial/foster and non-custodial parents during visitations could make the visitation easier and more pleasant for all. Staff members put forward the idea that center staff should monitor both custodial/foster and non-custodial parents during visitation, and that center supervisors should advocate for and intervene on behalf of the child(ren) if and when necessary.

Participants also repeated that providing custodial/foster parents with therapy and emotional support during visitations was necessary, as was providing these parents with co-parenting and other education and training (such as in financial management or nutrition), and help for those affected by domestic abuse. Similarly, providing custodial/foster parents with access to attorneys, practical financial and/or transport assistance, and ways of successfully navigating the court process were highlighted by both population samples. Of special importance was the desire for such resources to be managed and delivered to parents in a timeous, efficient, and effective manner.

Research question 7

Both staff member and parental responders highlighted improved family relationships, improved parental attitude and behavior, and negative reactions.

Staff responses

Staff members noted that oftentimes at the commencement of supervised visitations, there could be increased levels of stress and confusion, especially on the part of custodial/foster parents who perceive their child(ren)

as disloyal for spending time with the non-custodial parent. However, when parties begin to understand the visitation process and what it means for the child, most families calm down and find some form of 'happy medium', where the child can experience a positive time with the non-custodial parent.

One staff member observed that custodial/foster parents demonstrated "more coping skills, improved parenting, [and] improved use of services", while another staff member stated that custodial/foster parents showed a reduction in "volatility, [a] chance to process and attend some of their court mandated classes". Staff members also noted that parents who actively partook in and sought resources and assistance often had more realistic co-parenting expectations and parent-child interactions. Staff members stated that visitations produced more hope in custodial/foster parents with regard to reunification, or the potential for a family dynamic that was healthy and suitable for all parties. However, staff noted a potential in negative reactions such as one staff member found that "sometimes the custodial parent becomes more angry or frightened if the supervision goes well and they must face the possibility of the visiting parent having no supervision". Another noted that custodial/foster parents could get "annoyed that the visiting parent gets to have 'Disneyland' visits and get to be the 'fun parent'". Many staff members believed, however, that these negative reactions or a continued or escalated case of negativity was often due to custodial/foster parents not making use of the services provided, or being willfully vigilant in finding fault with the non-custodial parent or the system as a whole.

Parent responses

Parent respondents especially highlighted their positive attitude changes toward visitation and even their non-custodial 'partners'. One parent stated that they had "better feelings for my child about his father", while another had regained their faith in the system. Similar to the staff respondents, parents stated that visitations produced more hope in custodial/foster parents with regard to reunification, or the potential for a family dynamic that was healthy and suitable for all parties. Successful support and visitations also gave custodial/foster parents more control, lowered their levels of stress, and made them more comfortable knowing that they could rely on professionals to help them. However, some parents noted a potential increase in negative reactions. One parent highlighted how supervised visitation had caused their child extra stress and led to the child being unable to sleep, becoming very concerned about when they would have another visitation, and being constantly hungry. These findings suggested that more

support and education are needed for custodial/foster parents to better help their child(ren) navigate the visitation process.

In all, the results indicated that various support structures have already been put in place of custodial/foster parents. However, not all of these structures are adequately run or financed, and oftentimes parents are unaware, uneducated, or actively choose not to make use of these services. The findings also indicated correlation between what staff members witness in their centers and what they believe custodial/foster parents need, and what parents themselves deem important. However, there were noted differences between these two groups that need further addressing so as to ensure that custodial/foster parents get the help and support they need. Thus, the results of this study worked to highlight where, what, and how visitation centers may need to provide better support for custodial/foster parents during visitations.

Discussion

Mixed results of the study were expected, as parents and staff experience visitations differently. However, both populations noted that common stressors leading to supervised visitation included non-custodial parent drug addiction, domestic violence, non-custodial parent mental illness, and/or child abuse. The perspectives of both parents and staff revealed that the most effective support services included knowledge and reassurance for the custodial/foster parent about the supervised visits due to these stressors. Providing custodial/foster parents who had been victims of domestic abuse with support was also key. Behaviors and attitudes of the custodial/foster care parents improved following visitations, because they had a better perspective about the expectations of the visit. These parents also felt less concern for their child(ren)'s safety, because their child was in a safe and professional environment that mitigated the threat of the initial stressors that lead to the supervised visitation.

Findings indicated that effective management and improved visitations occurred with the onset of better strategies and practices that helped custodial/foster parents to meet visitation requirements. These included the removal of barriers to support, flexibility in visitation, discussing the expectations of both parents and children before and after the visit, and providing therapy and counseling services. Practical assistance such as financial support and transport assistance could also be beneficial. The quantitative findings revealed that the resources of formal kinship, professional services, and spouse partner support were more helpful to the custodial/foster parents in reducing the effects of their crises and pile-up stressors during the period of supervised visitation and during the period prior to the supervised visitation. Of particular importance were the findings related to parents' general need

for and perception of helpfulness of resources, regardless of what staff deemed more helpful. The qualitative responses of both surveyed staff members and parents also reiterated the need for education (especially regarding co-parenting), legal assistance, individual and family counseling/therapy, and mental health services for custodial/foster parents.

Implications

Both parents and staff members provided suggestions for support groups for custodial parents and the offering of individual and family therapy to improve relationships. This means that more resources for therapy options need to be established at visitation centers. There were also indications, from especially the surveyed parents, as to a lack of coherence, sense of adaptation, or understanding of internal and external environments related to supervised visitations. Parents' clear need for and experiences of helpfulness when provided with resources further established that improved education and information communication are needed at visitation centers. This is especially true for assisting parents in meeting expectations for supervised visitation, navigating the court process, understanding how to comply with mandated supervision, and how to cope with the logistical requirements for the visits. Providing custodial/foster parents with updates on their child(red) during visitations and making the rules, processes, and credentials of the supervisor clear to these parents could also work to lower their levels of anxiety. Custodial/foster parents were more effective at coping with visitations when they had a better understanding of supervised visitation, and had access or the ability to conduct social support, passive appraisal, and mobilization to acquire and accept help.

The findings, therefore, show where and how visitations centers could assist custodial/foster parents in improving their coping strategies and gaining the most from visitations. Improved visitations could also assist in improving or eliciting positive changes in family relationships and parent attitudes. By making improvements to not only the kinds of support systems, therapy, and education available to parents, but also improving parents' knowledge about and access to such services, supervised visitation centers could provide an excellent opportunity for catering to the established needs of custodial/foster parents. Meeting these needs could also, in turn, assist in creating healthy outcomes for children.

Future research

Future researchers could conduct studies regarding ways and means for improving visitation center support services for and communication with

custodial/foster parents. More research into how a positive response to visits on the custodial/foster parents' sides could improve the child(ren)'s visitation experience is also needed. Researchers could also conduct future research into the specific stressors, coping mechanisms, and support services noted in this study. This is especially true in relation to quantifying specific populations' responses or providing correlations between noted variables to establish their strength and/or effectiveness. Future researchers could attempt to draw correlations between this study's suggested service improvements, such education, and potential custodial/foster parental stress reduction. Additionally, other researchers could correlate the impact of interventions, such as legal and visitation education, on the willingness for custodial/foster parents to embrace the visitation program. This study opened various avenues for future research that could better validate the findings presented here. Future researchers could also correlate findings and suggestions made within this study to other population groups, centers, or emotional/psychological aspects.

Limitations

The study was limited by three primary factors. The first limitation was the use of a convenience sample that lacked the randomization necessary to create a more accurate reflection of the larger study population. This is especially true for custodial/foster parental views, as only five custodial/foster parents made up this study's parental population. The use of such a sample limited the study's generalizability. Future research utilizing different sampling methods and focusing on larger populations and specific demographics/population groups would work to add more validity and generalizability to the findings contained within this study.

The second limitation was this study's descriptive nature. While it provided a picture of the circumstances surrounding visitations, it made no conclusions regarding specific relationships between the study variables. For example, being able to identify relationships might help in understanding if demographics contribute to outcomes or if certain crisis such as substance abuse, domestic violence, or mental illness contribute to a certain outcome namely safety concerns and trust in the supervised visitation process. Future research is, therefore, needed to make such conclusions.

Finally, the researcher recruited staff for the study from a global population. Each geographic location may carry with it unique domestic factors, creating different circumstances for workers in the U.S. versus other parts of the globe. The researcher did not consider these factors in this study and may have, in some cases, altered the perceptions of the circumstances surrounding supervised visitations. Such factors could include

socioeconomic and political concerns. As such, the generalizability of the study was, again, limited.

Conclusion

Parents rely on coping mechanisms and resources to deal with supervised visitation. Support services could contribute to positive attitudes, increased familiarity with the process, and increase positive outcomes. The findings of the current study align with the theoretical framework and literature that preceded it while identifying several ways in which stakeholders could reduce stress and promote positive outcomes during supervised visitations. Such findings could go a long way to improving the visitation experience for all involved, and especially benefit the child(ren) caught in the middle.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation [institutional and national] and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

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