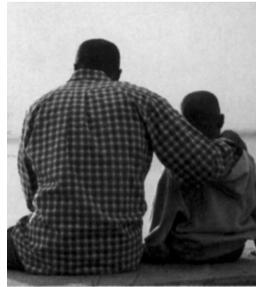
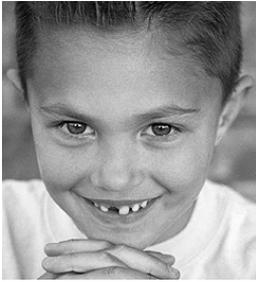


# Law enforcement guide to supervised visitation programs



INSTITUTE FOR  
FAMILY VIOLENCE STUDIES

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK  
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

## About the Clearinghouse

The Clearinghouse on Supervised Visitation serves as a resource on supervised visitation issues by providing technical and legal assistance to visitation providers, the judiciary, law enforcement, and social services agencies.

## About this Guide

The *Law Enforcement Guide to Supervised Visitation Programs* was designed to ensure that supervised visitation security staff are well informed about the paramount need for safety in the delivery of services to supervised visitation programs.

This publication may be reprinted or adapted with proper acknowledgement of the Clearinghouse.

### *Thanks to*

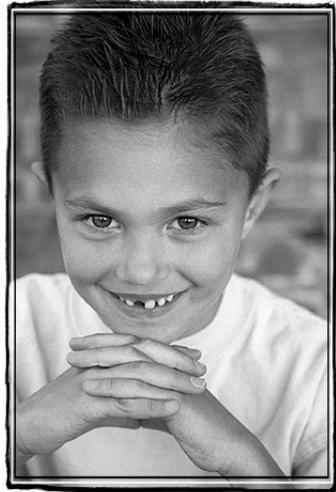
Special Agent Terry Thomas, Florida Department of Law Enforcement,  
and  
Lieutenant Leroy Johnson, Leon County Sheriff's Department,  
for their assistance in producing this guide.



## What are Supervised Visitation Programs?

*Supervised Visitation Programs provide an opportunity for nonresidential parents to maintain contact with their children in a safe and neutral setting. Supervised visitation programs may offer a variety of services to enable this contact to occur:*

- One-to-one supervision (one supervisor assigned to a single family)
- Monitored exchanges (supervision of a child's movement between the residential and the nonresidential parent immediately before and after unsupervised visitation)
- Group supervision (supervision of several families at a time)
- Telephone monitoring (monitoring phone calls from the nonresidential parent to the child)
- Ancillary services, such as parenting education
- Therapeutic supervision (mental health professionals providing therapy/counseling to the family during the visit).



**SECURITY  
ALERT**

*In 1999, Florida visitation programs reported over 40 threats by program participants to staff and volunteers.*

## Who Provides Supervised Visitation Services?

In Florida, there are currently 32 visitation programs. Nationwide, there are over 400. Programs are sometimes a component of the court system, a non-profit agency, or a part of a larger social services agency, such as a domestic violence shelter or child welfare agency.

Services may be provided by paid staff and/or volunteers. Staff/volunteers may be called observers/monitors or visit supervisors. The staff/volunteers monitor the parent/child interactions and report back to the court.

### SECURITY ALERT

*Melanie Edwards and her seven year old daughter were shot and killed by Mrs. Edwards' estranged husband at a Seattle, Washington, monitored-exchange program in 1998.*

## When are Supervised Visitation Services Provided?

Most families who participate in supervised visitation programs have been ordered by the court to do so. They may be ordered by dependency court judges in cases of child abuse or neglect, by family court judges in cases of divorce, or by judges hearing domestic violence cases. When ordered to participate in supervised visitation, parents are generally not allowed to have other physical contact with the child outside of the visitation program.

## **? What Kinds of Issues Do Families Typically Have Who Are Seen in These Programs?**

Almost all families using supervised visitation programs have experienced severe family or family member dysfunction. In dependency cases, this typically means that the children have been abused or neglected to the extent that the Department of Children & Families has removed the children from the home and placed them in foster care, an emergency shelter, or in a relative's home. In family law referrals, there may be substance abuse, mental illness, or severe ongoing conflict over divorce issues such as custody. In domestic violence cases, there may be a history of domestic violence and/or a court-ordered injunction for protection. Some referrals originate from criminal court when the parent has an extensive criminal history.

## **? Why is Safety So Critical?**

Safety is paramount because of the histories of child abuse, domestic violence, and severe conflict which have caused judges to order supervised visitation. Because of the real potential for revictimization, abduction, and/or violence during visits, these families need to have supervised contact. Despite supervised contact, programs report security problems on-site, such as sexual abuse, stalking, verbal abuse, destruction of property, battery, and even murder of families and staff.



Child participants may be anxious about the program, frightened about unfamiliar surroundings and staff, and concerned about revictimization. Adult participants may have ambivalent feelings including fear of repeat violence, anger at being ordered to participate, frustration over program rules, etc.

## SECURITY ALERT

*Two people were hospitalized for injuries they received on-site during supervised visitation in a Florida program in 1999.*



### When is Violence Possible on Site?

In many of these families there is an omnipresent risk of violence on site. In domestic violence cases, even though an order for protection has been granted to a victim, the perpetrator may try to use the program as a way to stalk his partner, continue abuse or intimidation, or use the child to try to influence the mother to drop domestic violence charges. In addition, there is a risk that some parents may attempt to abduct their child during visits.

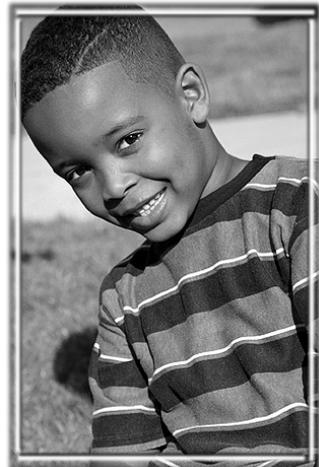


## What Behaviors Indicate Concern over Violence or Revictimization?

### DEPENDENCY CASES

*In dependency referrals, danger of the following behaviors may be present:*

- ...physical abuse of children by playing too roughly; slapping or hitting child
- ...sexual abuse of the child by forcing the child to have physical contact, spending time with child in bath room alone while fondling the child or exposing genitals
- ...emotional abuse of the child by yelling at child, scolding child, ignoring child, making unrealistic promises to child about returning home, asking probing and inappropriate questions
- ...attempting to kidnap the child
- ...using alcohol or illegal drugs

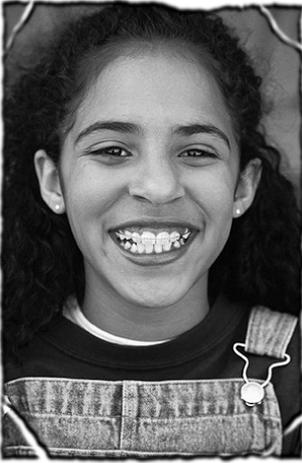


***In domestic violence referrals, danger of the following behaviors may be present:***

- ...threatening to hurt victim or children
- ...threatening to kidnap children
- ...stalking the victim and children upon arriving/  
departing from program
- ...intimidating children to reveal their current living  
arrangement, phone numbers, schools, etc.
- ...slashing tires or other destruction of property
- ...testing or violating program rules
- ...requesting “special privileges” such as unsupervised  
time with children
- ...denying or minimizing abusive behavior (“It’s all a  
misunderstanding”)
- ...blaming other parent for having to use visitation  
program
- ...attempting to bring weapons to program
- ...making suicide threats
- ...violating injunctions

***In family law referrals, danger of the following behaviors may be present:***

- ...threatening the other parent
- ...threatening to kidnap children
- ...stalking
- ...coming to program under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- ...bringing new partners to program to flaunt new relationships
- ...intimidating children
- ...telling the child “secrets” which cannot be heard by staff
- ...manipulating children with special gifts
- ...being hostile to program staff
- ...attempting to have staff intervene to change court order
- ...criticizing the other parent to the child



## What are the Duties and Responsibilities of Security Staff?

*Security staff provides critical support to the safe provision of supervised visitation services. Depending on the training of security staff and on program needs, security staff may:*

- design security plan for program
- monitor the visitation program facility and grounds for risks to safety of program participants (such as bombs or other incendiary agents and objects that could be used for weapons)
- use metal detectors to check for weapons and breathalizers to check for alcohol abuse or intoxication
- disarm all participants of weapons (this includes law enforcement officers who are participants, even if they are known to security staff)
- ensure that nonresidential parents and residential parents do not interact or have any opportunity to interact either in program building or in program parking areas

- monitor parking areas
- monitor program security system
- terminate visits when program rules have been violated
- be informed of all Orders for Protection
- make arrests as necessary or call in law enforcement officers to make arrests
- testify in court as to observations of particular visits, incidents, or families

**SECURITY  
ALERT**

*Nine programs reported threats to staff/volunteers by program participants away from the program site. One director was threatened by a nonresidential parent in a shopping center.*

*In some programs, security staff may also be required to:*

- conduct criminal background screening
- collect fees and make bank deposits
- escort parties to visitation rooms
- attend staff meetings
- administer drug/alcohol screenings

- deliver contraband to police station
- collect/return car keys/driver's licenses of nonresidential parents
- assist with monitored exchanges by ensuring that parents do not interact
- assist with service of process when appropriate
- remove family members, friends, or others from the program who are not part of the order for visitation

***In all cases staff must refrain from developing relationships with families, giving advice beyond how to abide by program rules, and engaging in favoritism.***



## What Type of Specialized Training Do Security Staff Need?

***Because of the histories that these families have experienced, security staff should have specialized training in :***

- CPR and first aid
- domestic violence dynamics
- substance abuse issues
- child abuse and neglect, including sexual abuse
- court procedures
- divorce and its effects on family members



**SECURITY  
ALERT**

*Dozens of arrests have been made at supervised visitation programs in Florida for past-due child support, outstanding warrants, and violations of orders for protection.*

**What Special Skills and Abilities Should Security Staff Have?**

- Ability to deal effectively with individuals, including children and adolescents
- Ability to recognize signs of fear/intimidation in adults and children
- Ability to recognize dangerous or potentially dangerous situations
- Ability to investigate suspicious or unusual events
- Ability to respond calmly in an emergency situation and to determine proper course of action
- Ability to manage violent individuals
- Ability to communicate effectively
- Ability to read, interpret, and apply regulatory materials
- Ability to work without close supervision and to make independent decisions regarding security issues
- Skill in the use and care of firearms



## **Can law enforcement officers participate as parents in supervised visitation programs?**

Sometimes supervised visitation programs receive referrals of families who have law enforcement backgrounds. These parents – both residential and nonresidential parents – must abide by all program rules including the rules which prohibit parents from bringing weapons onto program grounds. Security staff may not waive program rules by "vouching for" or attesting to the lack of security risk of *any* program participant. This prohibition applies even if the participant is a law enforcement officer or is personally known to the security staff.

**SECURITY  
ALERT**

*Vehicles of visitation staff and custodial parents parked at courthouse visitation programs have been vandalized.*

## Clearinghouse Resources

- *Competency Based Training Manual for Supervised Visitation Providers*
- *The Supervised Visitation Networker*, a quarterly newsletter
- *Bar & Bench Visitation Report*, a newsletter for the judiciary
- Technical assistance to existing and emerging programs
- Web Page including message board and chat room: [familyvio.ssw.fsu.edu](http://familyvio.ssw.fsu.edu)
- Video introducing parents to the Supervised Visitation process

## Contact the Clearinghouse

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