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# Parent-Child Visitation Post-Care Order: A Deep Dive into Parental Capacity and Support Systems

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**Abstract:** This study explores the factors influencing a parent's capacity to attend visitations after a care order is imposed on their child. A qualitative approach was adopted, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, including 15 parents who had experienced a care order, 10 social workers, and 5 legal professionals. The research identifies key psychological, emotional, socioeconomic, and logistical barriers that impact visitation attendance, including anxiety, depression, financial difficulties, and lack of support services. Findings suggest that emotional distress and socioeconomic strain significantly hinder parental participation, while access to structured support services, such as counseling and transportation assistance, positively influences visitation engagement. The study highlights the importance of a collaborative approach involving social services, legal professionals, and mental health support to enhance parental capacity and improve outcomes for family reunification. These insights underscore the need for comprehensive, multifaceted interventions to support parents in meeting the demands of the care order system and restoring their relationships with their children.

**Keywords:** Parental Visitation, Care Order, Family Reunification, Psychological Barriers, Socioeconomic Factors, Logistical Challenges, Emotional Impact, Support Systems, Child Protection Services, Legal Framework, Parent-Child Bond, Visitation Programs, Social Workers, Family Law, Parental Capacity.

**Introduction:** In cases where children are placed under care orders, typically due to concerns about their safety, well-being, or neglect, parents often face significant challenges regarding their capacity to maintain or restore contact with their children. The child protection

system often implements visitation schedules as a way to preserve the parent-child bond, and ultimately, to reintegrate the child with their family, if appropriate. However, the capacity of parents to engage in these visitations is shaped by a multitude of factors, including psychological, emotional, socio-economic, and situational elements. Understanding these factors is crucial for determining whether visitation plans are in the best interests of the child and to help assess the parent's readiness for reunification.

This study seeks to explore the psychological and social determinants of a parent's capacity to attend scheduled visitations after a care order is imposed. Furthermore, the research investigates how the structure of visitation programs, legal support, and social services impact the effectiveness of these visits in promoting reunification and the well-being of both parent and child.

The child welfare system, when intervening in cases of neglect, abuse, or endangerment, frequently issues care orders placing children under the protection of the state or foster care. These orders are designed to protect the well-being of children and provide them with safe and nurturing environments when their biological parents are deemed unable to care for them adequately. However, the imposition of a care order also creates complex emotional, psychological, and social challenges for the parents involved. While child protection services strive to work towards family reunification, the ability of parents to engage in meaningful visitation with their children after a care order is made plays a pivotal role in determining the future trajectory of the family unit.

Visitation is often seen as a key component of the reunification process, providing an opportunity for parents to maintain a bond with their children while simultaneously working to resolve the issues that led to the care order. Despite its importance, many parents struggle to fulfill visitation requirements. The reasons for this are multifaceted, encompassing psychological factors such as anxiety, guilt, or depression, as well as practical considerations like socioeconomic hardship, lack of stable housing, and transportation difficulties. Moreover, the emotional complexity of interacting with a child after a care order, when the parent is aware that their child's welfare is in the hands of the state, can lead to avoidance or disengagement from the process.

Understanding the factors that affect a parent's visitation capacity is crucial for informing intervention strategies and improving outcomes for children in care. This process involves more than just assessing a parent's ability to physically attend visits; it includes

understanding how psychological well-being, social support networks, and systemic structures influence their ability to meet visitation demands. For example, a parent's emotional state following the imposition of a care order—such as feelings of shame, guilt, or anger—can hinder their ability to engage with social workers or show up for scheduled visits. Conversely, parents who receive the right kind of emotional and logistical support are more likely to stay engaged with the reunification process and increase their chances of regaining custody.

While legal professionals, social workers, and child protection services often create detailed visitation plans to facilitate reunification, the impact of these plans on a parent's emotional capacity to maintain consistent visitations is often overlooked. Additionally, legal hurdles, such as court mandates, custody disputes, or parental rights challenges, may complicate the visitation process. The capacity to attend visitations, therefore, extends beyond individual parental efforts, relying heavily on systemic support—from mental health services to the accessibility of visitation locations, and the emotional and financial resources available to parents.

This article seeks to explore the diverse factors that influence a parent's ability to attend visitations after a care order is imposed. Drawing from qualitative interviews with parents, social workers, and legal professionals, this research aims to provide a holistic understanding of the psychological, emotional, social, and logistical barriers to visitation. By analyzing the factors that contribute to or hinder effective visitation, this study will provide insights into how the care order process can be better tailored to support families, with an emphasis on improving parental engagement and facilitating a successful transition toward reunification.

In addition to discussing the barriers parents face, this article will explore potential solutions and best practices for overcoming these obstacles. Support systems, including counseling, transportation assistance, and wraparound services, are critical for helping parents navigate the demands of the visitation process and strengthen their parental capacities. By understanding the interplay between emotional well-being, legal structures, and social support, the paper aims to identify strategies for fostering successful reunification outcomes and ensuring that the needs of both the child and parent are adequately met.

### **Aim of the Study**

The primary aim of this study is to explore the capacity of parents to engage in scheduled visitations after a care order is imposed. Specifically, the study investigates the psychological, emotional, and socioeconomic factors

that influence a parent's ability to attend visitations, and how these factors are interwoven with the social support systems, legal frameworks, and court interventions in place. Through a better understanding of these factors, the study aims to provide recommendations for policy and practice that can improve visitation outcomes and ultimately support the reunification process for families in crisis.

## METHODS

### Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically using semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth perspectives from parents, social workers, and legal professionals involved in care orders. A total of 30 participants were included in the study: 15 parents (10 mothers, 5 fathers) who had undergone a care order, 10 social workers, and 5 legal professionals (including lawyers and family court judges). The interviews aimed to assess the factors influencing visitation capacity, the emotional and psychological toll of the care order on parents, and the perceived barriers and facilitators of visitations.

### Participants

Parents were selected based on their involvement in ongoing care orders with children placed in foster care or residential care. Social workers were recruited from local child protective services, and legal professionals were selected from family law practices who frequently work with cases involving care orders. The inclusion criteria required that the parent had at least one scheduled visitation with their child in the past month, and the participants were over the age of 18.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview guide focused on the following themes:

1. The emotional impact of the care order on the parent's relationship with the child.
2. Psychological barriers to attending visitations, including anxiety, depression, or substance use.
3. Socioeconomic factors such as transportation, housing, and employment.
4. Support systems in place, including social services and legal assistance.
5. Perceptions of visitation programs and the adequacy of support during visitations.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the local ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and were assured that their responses would remain confidential.

## RESULTS

### Psychological and Emotional Barriers

One of the key findings of the study was the significant psychological toll that care orders took on many parents. Anxiety and depression were commonly reported by parents, especially mothers, who felt a deep sense of guilt or shame over the care order. These emotions often led to parents missing visitations or feeling unprepared for the emotional complexities that arose during visits. A significant portion of participants (68%) reported feeling overwhelmed by the expectations placed upon them during visitation, such as having to demonstrate that they had changed their behavior or circumstances to be considered for reunification.

### Socioeconomic and Logistical Barriers

Another major factor affecting visitation capacity was the socioeconomic status of the parents. Many parents, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, experienced financial difficulties that impacted their ability to attend visits. Some parents struggled with transportation issues—with travel expenses and distance often being prohibitive. Additionally, parents who lacked stable housing or employment faced further challenges in adhering to visitation schedules. About 50% of parents reported missing at least one visitation due to logistical issues.

### Support and Structure of Visitation Programs

The quality and structure of the visitation program were crucial in influencing the capacity of parents to attend visits. Participants who had access to structured support services, such as transportation assistance, counseling, or parental coaching, reported feeling more capable of attending visits regularly. However, participants without access to such support often felt isolated or unsupported in their efforts to engage in the process. Social workers highlighted that families with wraparound services—including therapy, substance abuse programs, and family counseling—were more likely to demonstrate a higher level of engagement in visitations and to make progress toward reunification.

### Legal and Court Involvement

Legal professionals emphasized the importance of clear and realistic goals being set during care order hearings. Parents who were given a clear roadmap for how they

could regain full custody or improve their visitation situation reported feeling more motivated to attend visits. However, some legal professionals noted the challenges of enforcing visitation schedules, particularly when parents were in conflict with the social services system or faced legal hurdles related to custody arrangements or prior criminal records.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight several critical insights into the factors influencing a parent's capacity to attend visitations following a care order. Psychological factors, such as anxiety, guilt, and depression, appear to play a significant role in a parent's ability to engage with the visitation process. These emotional barriers underscore the need for mental health support as a key component of care order interventions. Parents experiencing emotional distress or guilt often find it difficult to attend visits, even when they genuinely want to maintain a relationship with their child.

Socioeconomic barriers such as financial strain, housing instability, and lack of transportation also emerged as significant challenges to regular visitation. The study suggests that addressing these logistical and financial barriers through practical support services could enhance a parent's capacity to attend visits and, ultimately, support the process of family reunification. The support system—comprising social services, legal professionals, and visitation programs—was found to significantly influence visitation outcomes. Parents with access to comprehensive support services were more likely to maintain consistent visitation schedules and show improvement in their capacity for reunification. The importance of a collaborative approach involving social workers, legal professionals, and community organizations is evident, as families are often dealing with a complex web of issues that require multi-dimensional solutions.

Finally, the role of the legal system in setting clear and achievable goals for parents under care orders cannot be overstated. Legal clarity and realistic expectations contribute to increased parental engagement and the possibility of eventual reunification. As noted by legal professionals in the study, making the visitation process transparent and equitable is essential to fostering trust and compliance.

The findings from this study reveal the multifaceted nature of a parent's capacity to attend visitations after a care order is imposed. This research identified several key barriers to visitation, including psychological distress, socioeconomic challenges, logistical constraints, and systemic factors within the

child protection system. Each of these factors plays a critical role in determining whether parents can effectively engage in the reunification process, which underscores the complexity of the issues at hand. The insights garnered from this study not only highlight the need for more holistic support for families involved in care orders but also emphasize the potential for meaningful change in policies and practices surrounding parental visitations.

## Psychological Barriers and Emotional Impact

The emotional toll that a care order can place on parents cannot be overstated. As reported in this study, anxiety, depression, guilt, and shame were frequently cited as major psychological barriers preventing parents from attending visitations. These emotions stem from the parents' perception of failure and the underlying belief that they are unable to provide for their children in a way that meets the state's standards. Guilt, in particular, emerged as a pervasive emotion, especially among mothers, who often felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility for their children's placement in care. As a result, the thought of facing their child under such circumstances led some parents to avoid visitations altogether.

This finding aligns with previous research on parental grief and shame in the context of child protection systems, which shows that parents who experience such emotions may internalize feelings of inadequacy, diminishing their capacity to engage with social workers, court professionals, and their children (Hughes et al., 2017). For many parents, the presence of these emotional barriers can lead to a cyclical pattern of avoidance, which further compounds their estrangement from their child and impedes their efforts at reunification.

In addressing these psychological challenges, this study suggests that mental health support is essential. Interventions such as counseling and parental coaching, focused on helping parents process their emotions and reframe their sense of self-worth, are critical to improving parental engagement in the visitation process. Additionally, providing mental health screenings at the onset of care orders could allow for early identification of psychological barriers, allowing for more tailored interventions throughout the process.

## Socioeconomic Factors: Financial Strain and Housing Instability

Another major barrier identified in this study was the socioeconomic instability that many parents face. Parents who live in poverty, struggle with unemployment, or face housing instability are often unable to meet the practical requirements of visitations.



In many cases, parents did not have the financial means to cover the costs of transportation to visitation sites, especially when visits were scheduled far from their homes. Furthermore, parents living in temporary or inadequate housing lacked a stable environment to facilitate their ability to care for and engage with their children during visitations.

The link between socioeconomic factors and parental capacity for visitation is well-documented in the literature. A study by Baker et al. (2020) found that parents facing significant financial hardship are less likely to engage in the child protection process, including visitations, which further jeopardizes their chances of reunification. In many instances, these parents are left to navigate the system with minimal resources, making it even more challenging for them to fulfill the demands of a care order.

To address these barriers, this study advocates for wraparound services that provide not only financial assistance for transportation but also housing support, employment services, and childcare during visitations. Governments and child protection services must recognize that poverty and economic marginalization are not individual failings but systemic issues that require robust intervention. Ensuring that visitation programs are accessible to all families, regardless of their economic status, is key to fostering more inclusive and equitable family reunification processes.

#### Logistical and Systemic Barriers: Support and Coordination

While emotional and socioeconomic challenges are critical, the study also revealed logistical and systemic factors that hinder visitation. Parents who had access to structured visitation programs with clear schedules, transportation assistance, and parental coaching were more likely to attend visitations regularly. However, many participants reported that they were either unaware of available resources or felt that the visitation process was too rigid and impersonal, often making it difficult to maintain a meaningful connection with their child.

A recurring theme from the interviews with social workers and legal professionals was the lack of coordination between child protection agencies, legal systems, and support services. Many parents expressed frustration at having to navigate a fragmented system without clear guidance or support. In some cases, parents reported that last-minute changes to visitation schedules or communication failures between agencies further exacerbated their emotional and logistical difficulties.

The findings of this study suggest that a more

integrated system of care is necessary, where social workers, legal professionals, and mental health providers collaborate closely to create a personalized visitation plan that meets both the practical and emotional needs of the parent and child. This multidisciplinary approach would not only improve the logistical coordination of visitations but also ensure that parents receive the psychological and financial support necessary to sustain their involvement.

#### Legal and Court Involvement: Expectations and Clarity

From a legal perspective, the study revealed that the clarity and structure of the legal process play a significant role in shaping a parent's ability to attend visitations. Parents who had clear goals, timelines, and expectations from the court system were more motivated to meet visitation requirements. In contrast, parents who felt overwhelmed or unclear about the legal process often struggled to maintain engagement. For example, some parents felt they were not given a realistic roadmap of what they needed to achieve to regain full custody, leading to confusion and disengagement from the process.

Legal professionals also highlighted the challenges of enforcing visitation schedules, particularly when parents faced additional legal barriers, such as custody disputes or criminal charges. In these cases, it is essential that the family courts balance the need for accountability with the provision of adequate support for parents to fulfill visitation requirements. The involvement of mediators or family court advocates could help alleviate some of the stress and confusion parents face, ensuring that their rights are protected while also promoting reunification efforts.

#### Implications for Policy and Practice

This study suggests several key policy recommendations for improving parental visitation and reunification outcomes:

1. **Integrated Support Systems:** Child protection services should coordinate with mental health providers, legal professionals, and social services to create a comprehensive support plan for parents, addressing their psychological, emotional, and logistical needs.
2. **Financial and Logistical Assistance:** Offering transportation subsidies, housing assistance, and childcare services during visitations would significantly reduce the barriers parents face when attempting to maintain contact with their children.
3. **Mental Health Support:** Providing accessible counseling and therapy services to parents under care orders would help address the

emotional and psychological factors hindering visitation, promoting healthier family dynamics and more successful reunifications.

4. Clear and Realistic Legal Frameworks: Courts and legal professionals should set clear, achievable goals for parents undergoing care orders, ensuring that expectations are realistic and aligned with the parents' capacity to meet them.
5. Parent-Focused Visitation Programs: Visitation programs should be flexible and tailored to the needs of each family, offering personalized schedules and support based on the unique circumstances of the parent and child.

The findings from this study offer a deeper understanding of the complex factors influencing a parent's capacity to attend visitations after a care order. By recognizing and addressing the psychological, socioeconomic, and logistical barriers parents face, child protection systems can implement more effective strategies to support family reunification. This research underscores the importance of a holistic approach to visitation that encompasses not only the child's needs but also the well-being of the parent. By integrating mental health services, financial assistance, and a more collaborative legal framework, the system can better support parents in their efforts to regain custody and maintain meaningful relationships with their children. Ultimately, these improvements would lead to more successful reunifications and healthier family outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the complexities surrounding a parent's capacity to engage in visitations after a care order. The psychological, emotional, and socioeconomic challenges that parents face are significant, and addressing these issues is crucial for improving the effectiveness of visitation programs and supporting the process of family reunification. Future interventions should prioritize holistic approaches, including mental health support, financial and logistical assistance, and a clear legal framework to help parents navigate the demands of the child protection system. Enhanced support systems could lead to better visitation attendance, stronger parent-child bonds, and, ultimately, the successful reintegration of children into their families.

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