

# Supported visitation in out-of-home care: a scoping review of how practices are described, implemented, and experienced

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## ABSTRACT

This scoping review explores how supported or guided visitation is described, implemented, and experienced within child welfare contexts involving out-of-home care. International and regional legal frameworks, including Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, emphasize the rights of both children and parents to maintain contact after separation, provided it is in the child's best interest. Recent case law highlights that such contact should enable the mutual enjoyment of each other's company, underscoring the importance of relational quality and emotional safety. However, visitation often occurs in contexts marked by trauma, disrupted caregiving relationships, and conflicting expectations, indicating a need for professional support before, during, and after visits to enhance relational quality and emotional safety. Following PRISMA-ScR guidelines, nine peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025 were included. Thematic analysis identified four interrelated themes: forms and functions of support during visitation; professional competence for promoting emotional safety; implementation challenges and structural constraints; and relational dimensions of supported contact. Across studies, support was predominantly directed at adults, with limited attention to the child. Moreover, the dual function of visitation, as both a relational intervention and an implicit evaluative context, introduced tensions rarely addressed in practice. The review indicates that supported visitation remains inconsistently practiced and conceptually underdeveloped. Few interventions address emotional and relational needs for both children and parents, or embed such support systematically. This highlights the need for coherent, relationally grounded approaches aligned with their rights.

## 1. Introduction

Contact between children in out-of-home care and their birth parents is widely recognized as an important aspect of promoting continuity, supporting identity, and sustaining family relationships (Gerdts-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025; Healy et al., 2023; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011; Thomson & Thorpe, 2003). This principle is reflected in international and regional legal frameworks. Under Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), states are required to facilitate regular contact between children and their parents after separation, unless it is contrary to the child's best interests (UN General Assembly, 1989). In the European context, this is further supported by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects the right to respect private and family life for both children and parents. Importantly, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has interpreted Article 8 as encompassing not just physical access, but also the right to 'mutual enjoyment

of each other's company', meaning that contact should enable emotionally meaningful encounters between parent and child (ECtHR, 2025). This interpretation emphasizes that quality, not just frequency, is central to assessing whether contact arrangements fulfil their intended purpose. Despite these legal obligations, contact visits are often challenging to implement in practice (Humphreys & Kiraly, 2011). Particularly in cases involving child protection interventions, visitation may take place in contexts marked by trauma, conflict, or disrupted caregiving relationships, making the process emotionally complex and logistically challenging to manage (Humphreys & Kiraly, 2011; Taplin, 2005).

Although contact is widely portrayed in the literature as both a right and a protective factor, the process of facilitating meaningful visits remains marked by emotional and practical difficulties (Bullen et al., 2016; Gerdts-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025; Humphreys & Kiraly, 2011; Taplin, 2005). Contact visits may evoke feelings of anxiety, loss, and

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confusion for children, especially when the visits are poorly planned, supported, or occur in unfamiliar or emotionally unsafe environments (Bullen et al., 2016; Morrison et al., 2011). Parents may experience shame, grief, and uncertainty, which can hinder their ability to interact constructively during visits (Gerds-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025; Healy et al., 2023; Salveron et al., 2009). Removal of a child in some cases represents not only a legal separation but also a profound personal loss that is often socially unacknowledged, contributing to solitude, identity issues, and emotional detachment (Gerds-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025; Kenny & Barrington, 2018). In such contexts, contact may instead become a source of strain and distress rather than a source of connection unless actively supported (Gerds-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025). Conversely, when contact is supported through intentional and relationally attuned practices, it may foster positive emotional experiences and help repair or strengthen the parent–child relationship (Baylin & Hughes, 2016; MacDonald, 2020; Salveron et al., 2009). This growing awareness has contributed to increased attention to trauma-informed and relational approaches to contact in child welfare services, including recent work on trauma-informed family contact, co-designed resources for family time, and co-regulation in care contexts (Black et al., 2023; Ciftci et al., 2024; Collings et al., 2022; Levenson, 2017; Wall et al., 2016). Approaches like these emphasize the need for preparation, emotional containment, and reflection, not only to protect the child but also to provide parents with strategies to manage their emotions and relate meaningfully to their children. Support provided before, during, and after visits, through coaching, therapeutic accompaniment, or structured debriefing, is increasingly acknowledged to mitigate distress and promote psychological safety (Bullen et al., 2016). In line with these perspectives, clinical accounts also emphasize that safe and constructive contact depends on the presence of emotionally attuned professionals who can anticipate and manage the psychological strain that visitation often imposes on families. For example, Hoffnung-Assouline and Knei-Paz (2024) describe how preparing parents to reflect on the emotional meaning of contact, and helping them differentiate past trauma from present interactions, can foster more regulated and meaningful parent–child encounters. Altogether, these accounts emphasize that the emotional and relational framing of visitation by professionals plays a central role in shaping its effects.

Although contact is often viewed as a protective factor that maintains family ties and supports identity development (Healy et al., 2023; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011), reviews have shown that its effects are highly variable. A systematic review by Boyle (2015) found that while some children benefited from continued contact, others, particularly those with mistreating birth parents, experienced distress, reactivation of insecure attachment patterns, and emotional harm. These outcomes were strongly influenced by the quality of relationships prior to placement and by the relational and contextual support provided by caregivers and professionals during contact (Boyle, 2015). From this perspective, supported or guided visitation can be understood as a practical mechanism for operationalizing the legal emphasis on meaningful and emotionally safe contact.

### 1.1. Supported or guided visitation

Supported or guided visitation within the child-welfare context refers to structured efforts to help parents maintain contact with their children after placement in out-of-home care. While terminology may vary across jurisdictions, the core idea is to provide professional support before, during, and/or after contact visits to enhance interaction quality and promote the child's well-being (Levenson, 2017; Wall et al., 2016). The quality of support, on the other hand, may include preparatory conversations, in-situ coaching, therapeutic accompaniment, or structured debriefing sessions, typically delivered by social workers or trained practitioners (Bullen et al., 2016; Wall et al., 2016). It differs from standard supervised contact by its focus on emotional attunement, role support, relational continuity, and the support of children's

emotional regulation and family connections over time (Black et al., 2023; Bullen et al., 2016; Ciftci et al., 2024; Collings et al., 2022; Levenson, 2017). However, the purpose of professional involvement during contact is not always clearly defined in practice. In some cases, supported visitation is framed as a relational and therapeutic intervention. In others, particularly when reunification is being considered, it may simultaneously serve as an evaluative function, informing decisions about parenting capacity and child protection risk (Bullen et al., 2016; Haight et al., 2005). This dual function raises critical questions about how visitation is framed in policy and practice, and whether it is experienced by parents as supportive, supervisory, or neither.

The specific content and format of supported visitation vary. A systematic review by Bullen et al. (2016) identified three main models across twelve interventions aimed at improving contact quality: (1) individualized family support, such as visit coaching and therapeutic access programs; (2) group-based programs focused on reflective parenting, emotional regulation, and identity support; and (3) educational interventions targeting parents and/or foster carers. These interventions were typically delivered by social workers or other trained professionals and often grounded in trauma-informed or relational principles. Reported outcomes included improved parent–child interaction, increased parental confidence, and enhanced emotional responsiveness (Bullen et al., 2016). In line with these findings, Fischer et al. (2020) described how structured visit coaching was used not only to strengthen immediate interaction but also to build broader parental capacities, including empathy, behavioral scaffolding, and reflective functioning. However, Bullen et al. (2016) also noted significant methodological limitations in the existing evidence base, including small sample sizes, short follow-up periods, and insufficient detail on implementation processes. A subsequent scoping review by Healy et al. (2023) extended the knowledge base by examining voluntary programs that support sustained parent–child relationships in cases where reunification was not the primary goal. These included peer-led groups, therapeutic dyadic formats, and caseworker-supported initiatives focused on emotional healing, identity preservation, and relational continuity. While many such programs showed promise in addressing parents' experiences of grief, shame, and social marginalization, few examined how structured support was applied during visits themselves. Moreover, most were situated outside statutory frameworks, limiting their relevance for understanding how guided visitation is implemented within formal child welfare systems (Healy et al., 2023).

Previous reviews reinforce both the variety of supported visitation practices and the lack of coherent knowledge about their implementation (Bullen et al., 2016; Healy et al., 2023). While contact is increasingly framed as a relational and emotionally sensitive practice, there remains limited insight into how guidance is provided, how it responds to families' needs, and how it functions within the field of child welfare. Few studies examine the concrete dynamics of support during contact, how parents or children experience such practices, or how they influence relational outcomes. Drawing on these knowledge gaps, this review examines existing research on the processes, experiences, and outcomes of supported or guided visitation in the context of out-of-home care.

## 2. Method

This review was conducted as a scoping review to map and synthesize the existing literature on supported or guided visitation in the context of out-of-home care. Given the heterogeneity of study designs, conceptualizations, and outcome measures in the field, a scoping approach was deemed appropriate to explore how parental guidance during visitation is understood, implemented, and empirically examined (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The review was conducted and reported in accordance with the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines (Peters et al., 2015; Tricco et al., 2018).

## 2.1. Research question

Informed by existing research, the core question in this scoping review was: *How is supported or guided visitation described, implemented, and experienced in the context of out-of-home care?*

In this review, *supported or guided visitation* refers to contact between parents and children where structured support, coaching, or guidance is provided before, during, or in connection with the visitation. *Out-of-home care* includes foster care, residential care, and other placements under the responsibility of child welfare or child protection services. The question was informed by a modified PICO framework (Richardson et al., 1995), with population (P) referring to children in out-of-home care and their parents, intervention or phenomenon of interest (I) referring to supported or guided visitation, understood as visitation where structured support, coaching, preparation, or guidance is provided, and context (Co) referring to visitation settings within child welfare or child protection services.

## 2.2. Search strategy

An initial database search was conducted on 30 June 2025, followed by a repeated search on 31 December 2025 to ensure inclusion of the most recent literature. A total of nine bibliographic databases were included to provide comprehensive coverage across relevant disciplinary fields: Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA), CINAHL, Cochrane Library, Elsevier (ScienceDirect), ERIC, Idunn, PsycINFO, and PubPsych.

The search strategy was developed through an iterative process informed by best practices for scoping reviews, including guidance from the PRISMA-ScR checklist and methodological literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2015). The process involved four steps. First, an exploratory search across selected databases was conducted to identify key terms, indexing language, and relevant phrasing related to the topic. In the second step, these terms were combined into a comprehensive search string and adapted to each database indexing system. Third, reference lists of all included studies were screened for additional literature.

The following search string was used as a basis and adjusted as necessary for individual databases: (guidance OR 'parental guidance' OR coaching OR 'parent\* coaching' OR support OR 'parenting support' OR 'visitation support' OR preparation OR 'contact preparation' OR 'family support') AND ('visitation' OR 'contact') AND ('foster care' OR 'residential care' OR 'out-of-home care' OR 'looked-after children' OR 'public care'). In addition to the database search, a targeted search for grey literature was conducted. This included screening research reports, doctoral theses, and relevant publications found through institutional repositories and conference programs in child welfare and social work. The grey literature search used simplified combinations of the main search terms related to supported or guided visitation, contact, foster care, out-of-home care, child welfare, and child protection. The inclusion of grey literature was considered important to reduce potential publication bias (Trespidi et al., 2011).

## 2.3. Eligibility criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) The study was empirical, using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs, including program evaluations and practice-based studies; (2) The population involved children placed in out-of-home care (e.g., foster care, residential care, or placements under child protection orders) and their parents; (3) The concept under study was supported or guided visitation, defined as structured support, coaching, preparation, or guidance provided to parents before, during, or in connection with contact between parents and children; (4) The context was child welfare or child protection settings following removal of the child from the home; (5) The study was published between 2015 and 2025; and (6) The

publication was written in English. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on private custody disputes, divorce-related visitation, or contact arrangements outside the context of public child welfare. Conceptual or theoretical papers without an empirical component were also excluded.

Although a targeted search for grey literature was conducted, no studies meeting the inclusion criteria were identified through these sources. The inclusion of grey literature was nevertheless considered important to reduce the risk of publication bias (Trespidi et al., 2011). As a result, all included studies were peer-reviewed, although this was not a formal eligibility requirement.

## 2.4. Study selection, data extraction, and analysis

All identified records were imported into a reference management system, and duplicates were removed. The remaining records were uploaded to Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016), which facilitated the screening process. Titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria, followed by full-text screening of potentially relevant studies. The screening was conducted by two reviewers. Any uncertainties regarding eligibility were discussed and resolved in collaboration between the reviewers. Grey literature records were screened using the same eligibility criteria as the database records. Potentially relevant grey literature was assessed at title, summary, or full-text level where available, but no publications were included because they did not meet the combined criteria of being empirical, written in English, focused on visitation in out-of-home care, and concerned with structured support, coaching, preparation, or guidance in connection with contact.

In line with PRISMA-ScR reporting recommendations (Peters et al., 2015), a flow diagram was used to document the study selection process. An overview of the identification, screening, and inclusion of studies is provided in Fig. 1.

Data from the included studies were extracted using a predefined template developed to capture key characteristics and findings relevant to the review question. The extracted data included: (1) author(s) and year, (2) title, (3) country or region, (4) study design, (5) population and sample characteristics, (5) support type, and (6) main findings related to processes, experiences, or outcomes.

Given the diversity in study designs, measures, and reporting styles, quantitative synthesis was not appropriate. Instead, the findings were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach inspired by Braun and Clarke (2021). In contrast to previous reviews in this field (Bullen et al., 2016; Healy et al., 2023), which primarily focused on classifying intervention formats, the present review organizes findings thematically to identify cross-cutting patterns in how parental guidance during visitation is described and evaluated. This allows for greater insight into the relational, emotional, and organizational dimensions of supported visitation practices. The analysis followed an inductive approach, focusing on how supported or guided visitation was described, implemented, and evaluated in child welfare contexts. The findings sections of the included studies were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with how supported or guided visitation was described and evaluated. An inductive approach was applied, and initial codes were generated manually based on meaning-bearing units related to the nature, implementation, and perceived effects of support provided to parents in connection with visitation. These codes were then grouped into candidate themes, which were reviewed and refined through a recursive process to identify patterns in how parental guidance during visitation was conceptualized and experienced across different child welfare settings. Final themes were defined and named to capture key dimensions in the practice and function of supported visitation.

## 3. Result

The nine included studies represent a diverse and evolving body of

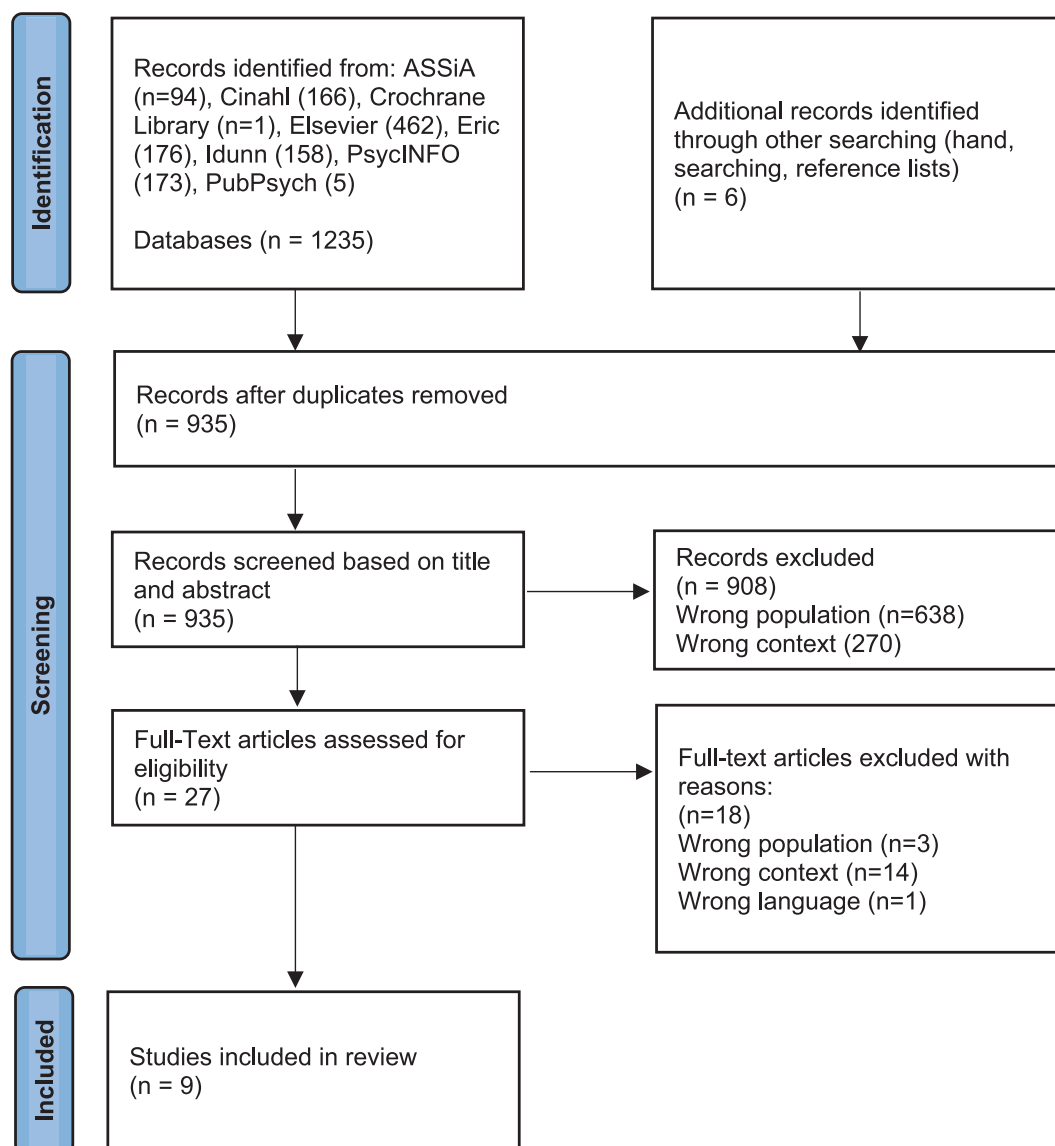


Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram describing the selection process.

research on supported or guided visitation within out-of-home care. As shown in Table 1, the studies vary in design, geographical context, target groups, and the form and content of the support provided. While some studies focus on direct interventions during contact visits, others explore preparatory and follow-up strategies, as well as broader organizational and relational frameworks that surround visitation.

The included studies primarily address processes and short-term outcomes, with limited attention to longitudinal effects or the broader implications for reunification and long-term relational development (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025; Fischer et al., 2020; González-Pasarín et al., 2023; Joly et al., 2022; Melander et al., 2025; Nese et al., 2016; Suomi et al., 2020). Support was provided in a variety of forms, including structured coaching during visits (Fischer et al., 2020; Nese et al., 2016), training for foster carers or professionals (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025; Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022), reflective group-based support for parents (González-Pasarín et al., 2023; Melander et al., 2025), and preparatory work with children and families before and after contact (Black et al., 2023; Suomi et al., 2020). This diversity reflects not only different theoretical frameworks but also varying assumptions about the purpose and function of visitation within child welfare systems (Black et al., 2023; Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al.,

2022).

The thematic analysis was structured to respond to the review aim by identifying how parental support during visitation in out-of-home care is described, experienced, and evaluated in the existing literature. The results are presented across four interrelated themes, reflecting processes, experiences, and reported outcomes: (1) Forms and functions of support during visitation, (2) Professional competence for promoting emotional safety, (3) Challenges in translating trauma-informed and relational knowledge into visitation practice, and (4) Relational dimensions of supported visitation practices.

### 3.1. Forms and functions of support during visitation

The included studies describe a diverse range of approaches to supporting parent-child contact in out-of-home care, differing in content, structure, and intensity. Nese et al. (2016) evaluated a structured, time-limited intervention using video-based coaching, delivered directly to parents during supervised visits. The focus was on enhancing parental responsiveness and interaction quality through real-time support. Fischer et al. (2020) similarly accentuated the use of coaching to develop core parenting capacities during contact, including emotional

**Table 1**  
Charting included studies.

Author (year)	Title	Country	Design	Population	Support Type	Key Findings
Bernedo & González-Pasarín (2025)	Improving the quality of contact during foster care: Learning from foster families.	Spain	Semi-structured interviews, pre/post interventions	Foster carer (N = 6)	Parental education program (Visits: a context for family development) aimed at improving the quality of contact visits.	Highlights the importance of preparing foster carers to enhance contact quality by developing parenting skills, strengthening communication with the child, and providing tools to help prepare children emotionally for visits.
Black et al. (2023)	Co-design with people with lived experience: Design resources to communicate with children and young people in care about their family time contact visit.	Australia	Three-year action research study design (The fostering Lifelong connections for children in permanent care). Use the Breakout Series. Collaborative model. Four plan to do cycles.	Four action research teams, caseworkers (N = 33), from eight partner organizations	Focus on seven practices: virtual distance, parent/carer debrief, care coaching, co-regulation,	Early in the project, communication tools for family time were identified as a priority. Not only was the information directed at an adult audience and not written in child-accessible language, but also the focus was on the mechanics of family time—responsibilities and procedures—rather than relationships and rights. Communication tools aimed at family members and foster carers were co-designed Tegan Whittaker and Chantelle Rozzi co-designed trauma-informed resources that recognize parents' emotional pain can be retriggered by family time. Roar is an illustrated storybook for young children in out-of-home care that explores the complicated feelings that arise during visits with their biological family.
Collings et al. (2022)	Trauma-informed Family Contact Practice for Children in Out-of-home Care	Australia	Mixed methods: online survey and semi-structured interviews	Child Welfare workers (N = 119)	Trauma-informed principles applied to contact: e.g., preparing carers, building relational safety, reflective practice, conflict handling	Caseworkers supported birth family contact in principle but lacked confidence and skills to provide trauma-informed support to parents during visitation. Practice focused primarily on physical safety rather than relational or emotional support. Training and supervision related to contact were inconsistent, and organizational structures to support reflective, relational work with parents during visits were underdeveloped.
Fischer et al. (2020)	Family visit coaching: Improvement in parenting skills through coaching visitation	USA	Quantitative, pre-post	106 parents in the out-of-home care context	Visit coaching: structured support before, during, and after visits (FVC model)	Significant improvements in parenting skills were observed; visit frequency was positively associated with skill gains; relational support was seen as central to effective visitation.
González-Pasarín et al. (2023)	A qualitative study about changes that parents experience through a pilot parenting support program to improve the quality of contact visits in non-kinship foster care.	Spain	semi-structured interviews with mothers before and after the intervention, to explore their perceptions regarding changes in their parenting competencies and the quality of visits with their child	3 mothers	The program <i>Visits: a context for family development</i> (Bernedo et al., 2020)	Participation in the program was associated with the reinforcement or strengthening of a positive view of visits. These mothers had expressed a willingness to collaborate with the foster family, and this became possible through the <i>My Visits Book</i> , which enabled them to share <a href="#">photographs</a> . The post-intervention results indicated improvements in several aspects of visits and parent-child interaction, specifically regarding the variety of activities they did together, communication between them, expressions of warmth during the initial greeting and when saying goodbye, and the parenting strategies employed by mothers.
Joly et al. (2022)	Practitioners' views on the effects of the 'For caring supervised visitation in Child Welfare' training	Canada	Qualitative study, semi-structured interviews	Child Welfare workers (N = 20)	Structured training of the supervisor	More structured analysis, improved planning, better use of visitation plans, more supportive and consistent visits; organizational barriers were also noted

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Table 1 (continued)

Author (year)	Title	Country	Design	Population	Support Type	Key Findings
Melander et al., (2025)	Group intervention for parents with intellectual and developmental disabilities with children in placement: A case study exploring the long-term process and outcomes	Sweden	Qualitative, three-wave case study	Mothers with IDD (N = 3)	Group intervention (“After all, I am a mother”)	Tailored preparatory support improved mothers’ emotional readiness for visits and provided a supportive framework that enabled more constructive parent–child interaction during contact.
Nese et al. (2016)	Effects of a video feedback parent training program during child welfare visitation	USA	Single-subject experimental design (multiple baseline); observation, video analysis	Mother-child dyads (N = 4)	Video-based coaching targeting 4 specific parenting behaviors (serve & return)	Increased supportive parenting behaviors across all dyads; positive maternal perceptions; high fidelity and social validity.
Suomi et al. (2020)	Cluster randomized controlled trial (RCT) to support parental contact for children in out-of-home care	Australia	Cluster-RCT	Children in out-of-home care (N = 183) with birth parents	Structured preparatory and reflective support to parents before and after visits (kContact intervention)	Fewer cancelled visits, increased parental satisfaction, improved worker engagement with contact planning; no significant change in child psychosocial outcomes.

attunement, behavioral scaffolding, and reflective functioning, with documented improvements in both the quality and frequency of visits. In contrast, Joly et al. (2022) outlined a large-scale professional development program to improve supervised visitation through practitioner training, with a broader focus on systemic competence and child-centered practices. Collings et al. (2022) adopted an organizational lens to examine how trauma-informed principles were interpreted and enacted (or not) across agencies, with family contact emerging as a key site where these principles were challenged or inconsistently applied. Bernedo & González-Pasarín (2025) offered another perspective, focusing on foster carers’ preparation for visitation and highlighting how improved insight into parenting and emotional support before and after contact may enhance the overall quality of the visit. González-Pasarín et al. (2023) added further insight by exploring a structured support program for parents themselves, centered on reflection, emotional regulation, and the development of relational awareness before and after contact. The intervention was associated with improved interaction quality, reduced tension, and greater parental self-efficacy during visits.

Support strategies thus ranged from targeted interventions embedded in contact sessions to sector-wide organizational change efforts. These variations reflect different underlying goals, ranging from enhancing specific parenting skills (Fischer et al., 2020; González-Pasarín et al., 2023; Nese et al., 2016) to fostering relational safety (Collings et al., 2022), promoting consistent standards of professional practice (Joly et al., 2022), and strengthening the role of foster carers in supporting child readiness and post-contact processing (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025). They also reflect differing assumptions about the role, function, and value of visitation within child welfare systems. Suomi et al. (2020) extended the scope of support practices by evaluating *kContact*, a structured phone-based intervention developed initially by Taplin et al. (2015). Rather than intervening during contact itself, the model aimed to increase parental readiness and reflection, and was associated with improved emotional quality, reduced conflict during visits, and increased parental satisfaction (Suomi et al., 2020; Taplin et al., 2015).

### 3.2. Professional competence for promoting emotional safety

The thematic analysis revealed that professional competence was central to how emotional safety during visitation was understood and supported across several of the included studies, albeit approached from different angles. In some cases, the focus was on practitioners’ ability to implement trauma-informed principles in supervised visitation (Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022), while in others, foster carers were the target of structured support aimed at improving the emotional quality of contact (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025). Melander et al. (2025)

further underscored the need for sustained emotional support and structured reflection to help parents navigate the psychological demands of visitation, particularly following the loss of custody. González-Pasarín et al. (2023) similarly showed that structured, relationally attuned support helped parents better manage anticipatory anxiety and emotional overwhelm related to visitation. By building confidence and emotional preparedness, the intervention contributed to safer and more regulated contact situations for all involved. What these studies (Collings et al., 2022; González-Pasarín et al., 2023; Joly et al., 2022; Melander et al., 2025) share is a concern with how emotional safety is facilitated during visits, not only through individual competence, but also through institutional, relational, and preparatory structures that surround and support the visit itself.

Both Joly et al. (2022) and Collings et al. (2022) identified significant gaps between trauma-informed knowledge and practice. Joly et al. (2022) found that while practitioners gained knowledge about children’s emotional needs and trauma impacts through structured training, they struggled to implement this knowledge without institutional reinforcement. Moreover, practitioners’ understanding of parents’ emotional needs and potential trauma histories was often limited or underemphasized in training, contributing to uncertainty about how to support both sides of the visitation dynamic (Joly et al., 2022). Similarly, Collings et al. (2022) identified key structural barriers to emotionally attuned practice, including a lack of shared language around trauma, weak reflective supervision, and insufficient organizational strategies for managing vicarious trauma. While staff were often committed to creating emotionally safe spaces for children and supporting parents during visits, they lacked clear tools or routines to operationalize this commitment in practice (Collings et al., 2022). Both studies (Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022) underscore the need for more than individual competence, highlighting that emotional safety during visitation depends on organizational coherence, sustained supervision, and adequate resourcing to support emotionally demanding work.

In addition to practitioner competence, Bernedo and González-Pasarín (2025) point to the importance of preparing foster carers as part of the professional support system surrounding visitation. Their study examined how a structured educational program helped foster carers develop communication strategies, anticipate children’s emotional needs, and manage transitions surrounding visits. By equipping foster parents with tools for emotional preparation and relational containment, the intervention contributed to more stable and supportive contact experiences. This suggests that emotional safety during visitation is not only a matter of practitioner skill but also of how foster carers are engaged and supported within the caregiving system (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025).

### 3.3. Challenges in translating trauma-informed and relational knowledge into visitation practice

Across the included studies, challenges in translating trauma-informed and relational knowledge into visitation practice were particularly evident in relation to training, organizational support, continuity, coordination, and fidelity to intervention principles (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025; Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022; Melander et al., 2025; Nese et al., 2016). In Joly et al. (2022), training improved practitioner awareness but did not guarantee behavioral change or practice innovation in contact settings. Staff described difficulty in shifting from procedural oversight to relational support, particularly in contexts where risk management was prioritized (Joly et al., 2022). Collings et al. (2022) further demonstrated how organizational norms often undermined trauma-informed intent. Despite sector-wide endorsement of relational practice, contact visits remained structured by rigid rules, reactive protocols, and a narrow focus on child protection. Practitioners lacked time and tools to tailor their approach to family-specific dynamics (Collings et al., 2022). Although Nese et al. (2016) offered a more structured and practice-focused model, their study also noted that successful implementation required sustained coaching and fidelity to the intervention protocol, highlighting that even direct interventions depend on organizational support and clarity of purpose (Nese et al., 2016).

Taken together, the studies by Joly et al. (2022), Collings et al. (2022), and Nese et al. (2016) suggest that the barriers to translating trauma-informed and relational knowledge into practice lie not only in individual competence but also in the structural contexts in which visitation takes place. When emotional support is not embedded in institutional frameworks and when follow-up mechanisms are weak, efforts to shift visitation toward relational or therapeutic goals often falter (Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022). Although caseworkers were often expected to facilitate contact that supported children's long-term relational needs, few systems were in place to help them develop the emotional literacy or collaborative skills required to fulfil this role (Joly et al., 2022; Nese et al., 2016). Melander et al. (2025) highlighted similar challenges, noting that even when adapted support was provided through structured group interventions, long-term change depended on sustained follow-up, inter-agency coordination, and an explicit acknowledgment of parents' grief and evolving caregiving role. A related point is raised by Bernedo and González-Pasarín (2025), who highlight that even when structured guidance is offered to foster carers, the success of such efforts depends on continuity, coordination, and integration into broader support systems. Their findings reinforce the idea that isolated interventions, whether directed at carers or practitioners, are unlikely to yield lasting change unless embedded within coherent institutional frameworks. When carers are included in preparation and follow-up, responsibility for supporting visitation is distributed across the caregiving and professional system rather than placed solely on parents or individual practitioners (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025). This suggests that translating supportive principles into practice depends on coordinated preparation across roles and settings, not on isolated interventions.

### 3.4. Relational dimensions of supported visitation practices

All nine studies (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025; Black et al., 2023; Collings et al., 2022; Fischer et al., 2020; González-Pasarín et al., 2023; Joly et al., 2022; Melander et al., 2025; Nese et al., 2016; Suomi et al., 2020) draw attention to a shared insight, that visitation only supports parent-child relations when its relational dimension is made explicit and supported in practice. Rather than assuming that contact itself fosters connection, several studies emphasized that visits must be embedded in emotionally attuned practices that promote reflection, preparation, and emotional safety across participants (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025; Collings et al., 2022).

Relational support took different forms. Some interventions focused directly on strengthening parental responsiveness during visits, using structured coaching methods to foster warmth and engagement (Fischer et al., 2020; Nese et al., 2016). Others highlighted the importance of preparing children in advance and supporting them afterwards, particularly through the active involvement of foster carers, who were positioned as key relational anchors surrounding contact (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025). Suomi et al. (2020) contributed a complementary approach, using low-intensity pre-visit phone calls to help parents regulate expectations and engage more reflectively during visits, highlighting that even brief, well-timed interventions can influence the emotional tone of contact. González-Pasarín et al. (2023) likewise found that guided reflection, emotional validation, and peer-based learning before and after visits contributed to strengthened parent-child connection and improved parents' ability to co-regulate emotionally during contact. Fischer et al. (2020) and Melander et al. (2025) further found that coaching designed to enhance empathy and emotional structure during visits was associated not only with improved relational quality but also with increased trust from professionals and more frequent, longer contact sessions. Black et al. (2023) expanded this understanding by highlighting how relational support must also include children and young people themselves. Through co-design with care-experienced individuals, the study documented how trauma-informed and age-appropriate tools can help children regulate emotions, understand their rights, and participate more meaningfully in contact processes. This addition foregrounds the child's own sense of safety and agency as integral to the relational quality of visits, offering a broader view of what relational scaffolding entails (Black et al., 2023).

This wider approach to scaffolding, before, during, and after visitation, was viewed as essential to ensuring that contact was emotionally manageable and developmentally meaningful, rather than overwhelming or formalized (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025; Joly et al., 2022; Melander et al., 2025). In the absence of such support, visits risked deepening the rupture rather than contributing to repair. Several studies described contact practices that primarily reverted to logistical management or behavioral surveillance, leaving limited scope for meaning-making, emotional containment, or genuine relationship-building (Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022). In these contexts, contact often became a controlled event rather than a relational opportunity, especially when practitioners lacked shared frameworks or clarity around the therapeutic potential of visitation (Joly et al., 2022).

In sum, the findings suggest that the relational potential of contact is not inherent in the visit itself but depends on how it is framed, supported, and experienced within the broader caregiving and professional system (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025; Black et al., 2023; Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022; Melander et al., 2025; Nese et al., 2016; Suomi et al., 2020).

## 4. Discussion

This scoping review identified a diverse range of supported visitation practices aimed at enhancing contact between children in out-of-home care and their birth parents. Across the nine included studies, support was provided in various forms, such as coaching during visits (Fischer et al., 2020; Nese et al., 2016), preparatory work with parents or carers (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025; González-Pasarín et al., 2023; Suomi et al., 2020), and professional training (Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022), reflecting different theoretical orientations and assumptions about the purpose of contact. While several interventions reported positive outcomes in terms of improved parent-child interaction and reduced conflict (Fischer et al., 2020; González-Pasarín et al., 2023; Melander et al., 2025; Nese et al., 2016; Suomi et al., 2020), these effects were primarily limited to short-term, process-level improvements. The findings also revealed considerable variation in how support was implemented, whom it targeted, and how its effects were assessed. Notably, the review highlighted four interrelated challenges: the adult-

oriented focus of most interventions; ambiguity between support and monitoring; gaps in professional capacity and organizational infrastructure; and a lack of consistent attention to the relational dynamics and emotional safety surrounding contact. These themes are explored in the following discussion.

First, a notable pattern across the included studies is that supported visitation practices are primarily directed at adults, rather than involving children as active participants in the support process. Although contact is widely framed as a way to promote children's well-being and preserve family ties, the reviewed interventions focused mainly on supporting parents (Fischer et al., 2020; González-Pasarín et al., 2023; Melander et al., 2025), carers (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025), or professionals (Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022). This approach tends to assume that children are indirectly supported by improved adult functioning, without examining whether the child actually experiences the intended benefit. One exception is the study by Black et al. (2023), who co-designed tools to help engage children and prepare for family time; few approaches integrated the child as an active subject in the design or delivery of support. Moreover, little attention was given to the interpretive and relational role of foster carers, who often mediate the child's emotional responses before and after visits. Bernedo and González-Pasarín (2025) highlight that equipping carers to recognize and respond to these reactions can be central to creating emotionally safe contact experiences. From the perspective of the legal framework that underpins contact in child welfare, this adult-oriented focus is particularly striking. Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights both emphasize the child's right to maintain contact with parents after separation, as part of the broader right to private and family life. However, in many of the reviewed interventions, the child's needs were addressed indirectly, through improved parenting skills (Nese et al., 2016), reduced conflict (Suomi et al., 2020), or better planning by professionals (Joly et al., 2022), rather than through integrated, relational support that includes both the child and the adult(s) in a shared process. This pattern raises important questions about whether current practices are sufficiently relational or developmentally attuned. ECtHR (2025) has underscored that contact should enable the mutual enjoyment of each other's company, not merely physical access. Achieving this presupposes a basic level of emotional readiness and relational safety for both parties and calls for support that is attuned to the dyadic nature of the parent-child relationship. When support structures focus exclusively on one side of the relational dynamic, they risk overlooking the child's need for preparation, emotional containment, and construction of meaning in the context of contact. More systemic and co-regulated approaches, such as those explored in Black et al. (2023) and partially reflected in carer-inclusive models (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2025), point toward alternative directions for the development of supported visitation practices.

Second, several studies in this review illustrate how support provided during visitation does more than enhance parent-child interaction in the moment; it may also shape how professionals interpret parental capacity. For instance, Fischer et al. (2020) found that increased parental empathy and structure during contact were associated with longer, more frequent visits, suggesting that guided visitation can influence professional judgments of parental readiness or suitability for reunification. Similarly, Nese et al. (2016) demonstrated how structured visit coaching not only improved immediate interaction quality but also built broader parental competencies over time. These findings point to a dual function of supported visitation: it serves both as a relational intervention and as a potential evaluative setting. This overlap raises critical questions about the transparency of purpose in visitation practices (Fischer et al., 2020; Nese et al., 2016). While clarity of purpose is often viewed as essential, the dual role of the professional, as both supporter and assessor, may inherently involve ambiguity. Rather than resolving this tension, the focus may need to shift to managing it transparently and ethically within relational dynamics involving all

parties. When supportive measures are implemented without clear boundaries between development and monitoring, the intended function of contact may be undermined. The ambiguity risks placing parents in situations in which the opportunity for growth simultaneously serves as a covert test of competence (Collings et al., 2022; Joly et al., 2022). In such cases, supported visitation may reproduce rather than reduce the pressures associated with child protection processes (Collings et al., 2022). These dynamics underline the importance of distinguishing between support as an intervention and support as a means of surveillance, particularly in contexts where reunification remains a possibility.

Third, the review also identified structural limitations in the conditions for delivering emotionally attuned and relationally supportive visitation. Although several studies pointed to the potential of trauma-informed and relational approaches (Levenson, 2017; Wall et al., 2016), the findings indicate that such practices often lack institutional support. Joly et al. (2022) and Collings et al. (2022) both documented how professionals struggled to implement emotionally sensitive contact due to organizational constraints, limited supervision, and the absence of shared conceptual frameworks. Even when practitioners were motivated to work relationally, they reported uncertainty about how to translate general principles into specific practices in everyday contact settings. This may also reflect the difficulty of shifting between risk-oriented and trauma-informed perspectives while remaining emotionally attuned, a task that requires not only conceptual clarity but emotional capacity and support. This gap is particularly salient given that contact often takes place in contexts marked by trauma, grief, and disrupted caregiving relationships, which require a high level of emotional competence and structural scaffolding (Humphreys & Kiraly, 2011; Taplin, 2005). However, few of the reviewed interventions described how such capacity is developed or sustained among practitioners. Relying on individual commitment rather than organizational coherence risks making emotionally attuned contact an exception rather than a consistent practice. Without stronger professional and institutional support, visitation may remain a procedural task focused on logistics and risk, rather than a relational intervention that promotes connection and repair. While earlier reviews have raised similar concerns (Bullen et al., 2016; Healy et al., 2023), the present findings point to a persistent implementation gap, where relational goals may be endorsed at the policy level but fail to materialize in everyday practice. Bridging this gap requires not only training but systemic change that enables professionals to work relationally in contexts that are often emotionally demanding and structurally constrained.

Fourth, the review suggests a lack of conceptual clarity regarding the relational and emotional processes that visitation is intended to support. Across the included studies, these processes concern not only the occurrence of contact, but also how children and parents are prepared for the visit, supported in managing emotional responses during the encounter, and helped to make sense of the relationship afterwards. This connects the limited inclusion of children as active participants with the broader absence of structured frameworks for supporting children's own emotional and relational sense-making before, during, and after visits. When these processes are not conceptually integrated into visitation practices, contact may become task-oriented rather than relationship-oriented and more dependent on individual practitioners' skills. Terminology also matters in this regard. Although 'visitation' is used in this review to reflect the terminology in the search strategy and much of the included literature, terms such as 'family time' may foreground the relational purpose of contact more clearly by emphasizing children's continuing family connections (Black et al., 2023; Ciftci et al., 2024). Contact is also widely positioned as a relational right (Healy et al., 2023; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011), yet few of the reviewed interventions treated the parent-child relationship as a dynamic process requiring emotional co-regulation, narrative framing, or developmental attunement (Black et al., 2023; Salveron et al., 2009). Instead, support was often tied to discrete events, such as preparation, observation, and debriefing, rather than embedded in a broader understanding of contact as an evolving

relational experience with intrinsic value for the child's identity, continuity, and sense of belonging, as emphasized by the ECtHR (2025) in its interpretation of the right to mutual enjoyment of family life. This conceptual limitation has practical consequences. When visitation is framed primarily as a logistical or behavioral task, the emotional risks associated with poorly supported contact, such as confusion, shame, or relational detachment, are rarely addressed in a structured or reflective manner (Bullen et al., 2016; Gerds-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025). Practitioners, as noted in Collings et al. (2022) and Joly et al. (2022), may struggle to enact relational intentions when institutional structures emphasize observation and control over reflection and connection. Such mutuality cannot be assumed; from a relational and trauma-informed perspective, it must be supported through practices that recognize the child as an active subject and attend to how the child interprets, organizes, and regulates the experience of contact (Baylin & Hughes, 2016; Hoffnung-Assouline & Knei-Paz, 2024). The findings therefore underscore the need for conceptual models that position emotional sense-making not as an optional enhancement, but as integral to the function of contact in child welfare.

While this scoping review provides a broad overview of current practices and challenges in supported visitation, it is limited by the relatively small number of eligible studies and the heterogeneity of study designs and outcome measures. Future research should explore how children experience guided contact, how relational dynamics evolve, and how emotionally attuned practices can be systematically embedded within statutory child welfare systems. Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing visitation practices that are developmentally informed, relationally grounded, and aligned with the rights of both children and parents.

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Both authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing. Both have reviewed and approved the final version and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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#### Ethical considerations

This scoping review is based exclusively on previously published studies. No new data were collected, and no human participants were involved. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. All included studies were reviewed to ensure that ethical approval and procedures were reported by the original authors.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

This study is based on a review of published literature. All data included in the review are available through the original publications, which are referenced in the article. No new empirical data were generated or analysed in this study.

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