



The Mediation Center
Finding common ground.

Family Visitation Program (FVP) Safe Exchange Parent Handbook

This packet is intended to help you fully understand how to use FVP most effectively. FVP is a child-focused service. We provide a safe and comfortable place for parents and children to visit and/or exchange in a supervised setting. Staff members at FVP strive to make your visit/exchange experience as clear and comfortable as possible.

The Family Visitation Program believes that every child should have an opportunity to form positive, healthy relationships with their parents, despite any previous conflicts. FVP provides supervised visitation and safe exchange services to families with a history of domestic violence, substance abuse, child abuse or neglect, mental health concerns, or high-conflict custody disputes. FVP is committed to helping parents establish and maintain positive parenting relationships with their children and minimize the effects of conflict between parents.

Services offered:

❑ **Supervised Visitation**

Allows parents and children to spend time together in a safe, secure environment. FVP provides age appropriate activities for families to engage in together. Parents and children visit in a private room where a visit monitor is present to observe and take notes, ensure safety, and provide support to the visiting parent. The custodial parent/guardian and non-custodial parent do not have contact with each other at any point before, during, or after the visit.

❑ **Safe Exchange**

Allows a child to transition between parents without the parents having contact. Parents who use safe exchange services generally have a shared custody agreement, a court order, or a non-custodial parent has unsupervised visitation with the child. Some parents exchange their child for a few hours, and others may exchange for a weekend or longer.



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Getting Started

After both parents/parties complete the intake process, an exchange schedule is arranged by FVP staff. Every effort is made to schedule the initial exchange within two weeks of the last completed intake. Parents do not have contact with each other during intake or exchange services.

FVP has two entrances. Each party will be assigned a separate entrance and an adjacent parking area.

N. French Broad Avenue Entrance

- Park on the street or to the south of the building. Do not park elsewhere.
- Come to the N. French Broad Avenue entrance
- Arrival and departure times will be determined by FVP staff.
- Arrival time will be 15 minutes prior to the exchange, unless there is a Domestic Violence Protective Order in place.
 - If there is a Domestic Violence Protective Order in Place, the Plaintiff will have no wait time
- **Parents are encouraged to arrange for children to tour the facility prior to the first exchange**

Carter Street Entrance

- Park near the door at the Carter Street entrance. Do not park elsewhere.
- Come to the Carter Street entrance
- Arrival and departure times will be determined by FVP staff.
- Arrival time will be at the time of the exchange, unless there is a Domestic Violence Protective Order in place.
 - If a Domestic Violence Protective Order is in place, the arrival time will be 15 minutes prior to the exchange
- Departure time will be 15 minutes after the exchange is complete

Program Procedures

Security

To ensure everyone's safety, a police officer may be present in the building at any time.

Our security officers are armed police officers, in plainclothes or uniform. Security officers or staff members may search anyone and their belongings at any time to ensure safety. As an additional safety measure visit/exchange rooms, hallways, parking lots, and waiting areas are monitored by video and audio. If security or staff should have any safety concerns, they are authorized to refuse an exchange or decline any guest, child, or adult entry into the facility.

Scheduling

We do everything we can to find an exchange time that works well for both children and parents.

We can only schedule exchanges when we have available space and staffing. Once we determine an exchange time, your exchange will occur on the same day and time. Parents are expected to stick to their exchange schedule - be present and on time. Cancelled exchanges will not be rescheduled, except in cases of inclement weather. Instead, the exchange schedule will resume at the time of the next scheduled exchange. If either parent/party is more than 15 minutes late, the exchange may be cancelled.

Scheduling (continued)

Exchanges are offered during the following hours (based of availability of staff and space)

<u>Mondays:</u>	4:00PM – 5:00PM – exchanges only
<u>Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays:</u>	2:00PM – 7:30PM
<u>Fridays:</u>	2:00PM – 5:30PM
<u>Sundays:</u>	4:30 PM – 5:30 PM – exchanges only

Arrival

To ensure everyone’s safety, no one is to be on the premises except at their scheduled exchange time unless you have an appointment. Entry into the building is not permitted until your scheduled time. **You must wait off our premises if you arrive early.**

FVP may cancel exchanges or refuse services at any time.

Staff may discontinue services or end exchanges in process for non-payment, excessive cancellations, non-compliance with FVP policies and procedures, if it is determined that the needs of the family cannot be met by the training and qualifications of staff, or due to other circumstances such as staff/volunteer illness or inclement weather. If services are terminated, both parties will be notified in writing within 14 days from the date of discontinuation.

Payment of Fees

Both parties are required to sign a Fee Agreement prior to receiving services. Unless otherwise court-ordered, fees for exchanges are to be paid by both parties in the exchange based on each individual clients’ household income.

When both parents pay for an exchange, the total paid by both parents will not exceed the full cost of the exchange (\$45) and neither parent will pay more than half of the full cost of the exchange (\$22.50). If both parties pay for exchange, and according to the sliding scale, a parent’s fee is higher than half the full cost, the parent will pay the half the full cost. If, according to the sliding scale, the parent’s fee is lower than half the full cost, the parent will pay the amount indicated by the sliding scale.

Once either party owes past-due fees amounting to \$15 or more, future exchanges will be cancelled until all fees are paid in full. Once fees are overdue, fees must be paid at least 24 hours in advance of your next scheduled exchange to avoid cancellation. Failure to pay past-due fees may result in suspension or discontinuation of services.

Fees for FVP services are as follows:

<i>Intake Fee:</i>	\$25
<i>Intake cancel with less than 24-hours’ notice:</i>	\$25- also charged for a no-show intake appointment
<i>Exchange:</i>	\$45- income-based fee reduction available
<i>No Show exchange:</i>	\$30- no contact with FVP to cancel prior to the exchange
<i>Exchange cancel with less than 24-hours’ notice:</i>	\$15- fee may be waived in the event of an illness or emergency
<i>Observation Note Review:</i>	\$20- if viewed more frequently than every 60 days (see below)
<i>Document Release Fee:</i>	\$30- for the first 5 exchange notes, \$2 for each additional note
<i>Testimony Fee:</i>	\$40- per hour, including wait time

Fee Reduction Application

The Family Visitation Program offers a sliding scale based on income. Clients may apply for a fee reduction based on their household income. Families whose income does not appear on the sliding scale do not qualify for a fee reduction. Fee reductions will only be considered once all required income verification documentation has been received. Paying clients will be asked to provide updated income verification documentation every 6-12 months.

Cancellations and No Shows

If you need to cancel an exchange for any reason, we ask that you provide *at least* 24 hours' notice by calling 828-251-6089 x420.

If an exchange is not cancelled at least 24 hours in advance, the cancelling party will be charged a \$15 fee, no-show exchanges will be charged a \$30 fee. If proof of illness or documentation of an emergency is provided, the fee may be waived. Any fees incurred are due at the next scheduled exchange.

Suspension/Discontinuation of Service

Exchanges work best when there is consistency for the child. **If either party cancels three times within 90 days, the next two exchanges will be suspended.** If after a two week suspension services cannot be reinstated due to non-payment of past due fees, services will be discontinued.

After a two week suspension, if there are three additional cancellations or no-shows within 90 days after reinstatement, exchanges will be discontinued.

No family is guaranteed that they will be able exchange on the same day or time after a suspension. An updated intake appointment may be required if you would like to resume services six months from the date of your last exchange.

Two no shows without any contact with FVP prior to the exchange, by either party, may result in discontinuation of services.

We understand that circumstances may change. **If scheduling conflicts occur due to work, school, extra-curricular activities, or vacation plans, please contact the Client Services Coordinator immediately to discuss possible alternatives. Good communication will help avoid suspension or discontinuation.**

Share your concerns

We want you and your child to feel safe and comfortable at FVP, and we understand that a number of concerns could arise from exchanges. Please share any concerns that you have when your child is not present. At times, we may need to get back to you outside of your regularly scheduled exchange time. Please feel free to call the Client Services Coordinator at 828-251-6089 x420 with any questions or concerns.

Grievance Procedure

If you have a concern, you may contact the Client Services Coordinator at 251-6089 x420 or the Program Director, at 251-6089 x419. If the issue remains unresolved, you may submit a grievance in writing to the Mediation Center Executive Director. The Executive Director will review the grievance and respond in writing within 14 days. Decisions made by the Executive Director are final.

Observation Notes

Observation notes are factual, neutral, and objective records of services, parent/child interactions, and interventions by staff. The Family Visitation Program does not provide evaluations of families or make recommendations about future arrangements for parent-child access.

Observation notes may be taken by trained professionals, para-professionals, or volunteers. Observers are instructed to record what happens during parent-child contacts and do not document opinions or judgments. The parent/child interactions have occurred in a structured and protected setting. No prediction is intended about how contacts between the same parent and child might occur in a less protected setting. Care should be exercised by the users of FVP's observation notes when making such predictions.

Reviewing Observation Notes

To review observation notes from exchanges, schedule an appointment in advance. You must come to FVP and review the notes in the presence of a staff member. You may review them once every 60 days free of charge. If you wish to view observation notes more frequently, a \$20 fee will be charged, payable at the appointment. You may not remove observation notes from the office, or write down information about the contents of the observation notes.

Requesting Safe Exchange Documentation

Copies of notes will only be provided by subpoena, by the request of the Department of Social Services, or when requested by a therapist. If you or your attorney subpoenas the observation notes associated with your exchanges, you must allow seven (7) days for these documents to be provided. There is a \$30 document release fee. If more than five exchanges notes are requested, there is an additional fee of \$2 per exchange note.

Please Remember:

- 1. If you show signs of being under the influence of drugs or alcohol,** you may not have an exchange that day.
- 2. Weapons are not allowed inside FVP,** including but not limited to: guns, knives, pocket knives, razor blades and any object determined by staff or security to be potentially dangerous.
- 3. Straighten up exchange waiting rooms before you leave** so that the area is ready for the next family. We encourage parents to include their child in the cleaning up the rooms.
- 4. Engage in age-appropriate activities with your child.** DVDs, videos, games and toys must be age appropriate. Wrestling and rough play are not allowed. Realistic toy weapons are not allowed.
- 5. Physical punishment or the threat of physical punishment is not allowed at FVP.** This includes slapping a child's hand, spanking, squeezing a child's arm, etc.

Items Brought Into FVP

Staff will search all gifts and food brought into FVP by both parties. If you want to wrap a gift, please bring materials to FVP to wrap the gift after it has been viewed by staff.

Exchanges are to safely transfer the child from one parent to another. FVP is not responsible for the distribution of property or exchanging items not directly related to the children's needs.

Photos and Videos

Parents may take still photos of their child during an exchange. Do not take photos of staff or volunteers. Video recording is prohibited.

Child-Related Communication

FVP staff will only pass child-related communication between parents. A form is provided for this communication. FVP staff will review the form for appropriateness and make a copy before passing it to the other parent. FVP staff and volunteers will not communicate verbal messages between parents.

Communications not related to the child should be directed to parents' legal representatives (attorneys).

Guests

FVP will not allow unapproved third parties in exchanges. No registered sex offenders are allowed at the Family Visitation Program. Guests will be not permitted if the court order disallows them or if there are safety concerns which indicate the guest arriving with the exchange is unsafe for the child. **No unknown persons will be permitted to attend an exchange or have entry into the facility.**

All adult guests must present their driver's license (a copy will be made and kept on file) and be added to the drop off/pick up authorization form.

Appropriate Discussion

Conversations between parents and children while at FVP should be positive and age appropriate. Talking about court proceedings or other adult topics is not appropriate. Neither parent should make negative comments about the other parents while at FVP. Profanity, interrogation, threats or threatening behavior of any kind are not permitted. Staff and volunteers are trained to intervene if there is a concern.

Preparing Your Child to Exchange at FVP

It takes time for children to adjust to the FVP environment and the exchange process. Please prepare your child and help them understand the exchange process. A positive outlook and a smile can go a long way in making a child more relaxed. To help make your child more comfortable, we encourage parents to bring their child for a tour and to play at FVP before the first exchange. Our staff is sensitive to your child's needs and will assist in making the transition as smooth as possible. Let us know how else we can help.

Mandatory Reporting

FVP staff are required to report any reasonable suspicion of child maltreatment to the appropriate authorities. This includes physical, sexual or emotional abuse and/or neglect. FVP staff does not investigate or determine if child abuse or neglect has occurred.

Medication

FVP staff and volunteers cannot administer any medication to children except for minor first aid. Any medication (prescription or non-prescription) given to a child at FVP is the responsibility of parents. If medication is included in the child's belongings for exchanges, the parents must provide written instructions for the medication, dosage and time/s to be given.

Inclement Weather

The Family Visitation Program follows AB-Tech's decisions for weather-related closing and delays. You can determine if AB-Tech is closed or delayed by visiting www.abtech.edu or calling the campus. If AB-Tech closes only for evening classes, the Family Visitation Program will close at 5pm. If AB-Tech opens only for evening classes, the Family Visitation Program open for all visits and exchanges that begin after 5pm. If you do not live in Buncombe County, and the community college in your county is closed due to inclement weather and you need to cancel your exchange, your exchange will be excused and will not be charged a fee.

In the event of a weather related cancellation, FVP offers options to reschedule safe child exchanges.

If you would like to reschedule, instead of waiting for your next regularly scheduled exchange:

- Before 12pm on the first business day that we are open after a weather-related closing, call the Family Visitation Program at (828) 251-6089 x420 to request an exchange on that day at your regular time.
- FVP staff will contact the other parties to confirm the exchange.
- If your regular exchange time is not available, we will work with all parties to find a workable time as close as possible to your normal time.

In the Event of a Fire Alarm

FVP staff will assist everyone in exiting the building. Carter Street Entrance will exit through their assigned entrance. FVP staff will escort children through the N. French Broad exit. N. French Broad Avenue parents will exit through the front door and cross the street to safety. In the event that either of the two entrances is blocked, all staff, children, and clients will exit out of the nearest door to safety. Staff will remain with children until the parent departing with the children are able to pick up at designated entrance.

The Mediation Center's Confidentiality Policy

It is the policy of The Mediation Center to keep client information confidential.

Exceptions to this general rule of confidentiality include the following:

- When the client has expressly consented to the disclosure of information, such as through a written release of information.
- When FVP receives a subpoena or court order requiring the disclosure of confidential information.
- In extraordinary circumstances, such as revealing confidential information to law enforcement authorities when necessary to protect the health, well-being, or safety of any client, employee, or other party.

The Mediation Center's Non-Discrimination Statement

It is the policy of The Mediation Center to maintain an environment free of discrimination and to prohibit discrimination and harassment against any person on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, age, or handicap. Harassment of The Mediation Center's Family Visitation Program participants or staff will not be tolerated.

The Mediation Center encourages individuals with disabilities to participate in its programs. If you require special accommodations, have questions about physical access, or require alternative communication of program information, please contact The Mediation Center at 828-251-6089 x419 before your exchange.