



CORE
TEEN

Critical On-going Resource Family Education

Right Time Training: Continued Connections

CORE TEEN CURRICULUM

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CORE TEEN CURRICULUM: RIGHT TIME TRAINING

The CORE Teen Curriculum is comprised of three components: 1) Self-Assessment; 2) Classroom Training, and 3) Right Time Training. It was developed through a 3 year Foster/Adoptive Parent Preparation, Training and Development Initiative cooperative agreement with the Children’s Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under grant #90CO1132. Project partners included Spaulding for Children; the ChildTrauma Academy; The Center for Adoption Support and Education; the North American Council on Adoptable Children; and the University of Washington.

The intent of the project was to develop a state-of-the-art training program to equip resource parents to meet the needs of older youth who have moderate to serious emotional and behavior health challenges who require intensive and coordinated services and may be at risk for more restrictive congregative care.



CONTINUED CONNECTIONS OVERVIEW

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When a child is denied their family, nothing can take its place.

~Gerald Peterson

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The purpose of this portion of the training is to enhance your learning around Continued Connections. In this program, Continued Connections targets the honoring of the teens' former attachments, acknowledges that teens are part of other families and have other relationships, and recognizes that the loyalty and connection to those relationships may be significant. Continued Connections also explores the importance of your relationship with the youth's birth family and other people who are important to the youth. This theme captures the concept that resource parents may need to move beyond their own discomfort toward prior relationships in order to help the youth grieve losses, maintain connections, confirm their identity, and form healthy attachments with others.

Once you have completed this portion of the training program, you will:

- ▶ Enhance your understanding of the importance of supporting youth's connections
- ▶ Identify ways to support youth's connections to people who are important to them
- ▶ Recognize the connection between birth family and identity development
- ▶ Identify strategies to actively and intentionally engage, honor, respect, and co-parent with the birth family

Just as important as achieving a permanent family living arrangement for a youth is supporting their past, current and future relationships. This includes connections to siblings, birth family, extended family members, and other significant people in the youth's life. These connections are foundational to the development of the youth's identity and are a key contributor to their overall well-being.

We know that the youth's desire to stay connected to their birth family is normal and healthy. The desire to maintain a relationship with birth parents or to seek out information about the birth family is all part of healthy development—it does not indicate a lack of healthy adjustment to their new caregiver. When youth have access to their birth parent and family connections, they can continue to make sense of their lives and have more opportunities to better understand the reasons for their separation from their family. Having the support of a foster or adoptive parent during the process can help the youth feel more comfortable, create trust, and increase the connection between the youth and their caregiver.

Equally important to supporting youth connections to their families is the development of your own relationships with those who are important to the youth. Traditionally, the foster parent role has been defined as that of a substitute parent. In more recent years, foster parents are being asked to think of themselves as a support to not only the youth, but to the birth family as well. This means that instead of thinking of yourself as a “rescuer” of the youth (which infers their parents are “bad parents”), you will need to recognize that the family unit is the focus of support and the primary role of resource families is to strengthen the family's potential for reunification. When reunification cannot occur, maintaining a relationship with the birth family can provide you and the youth with many benefits in the long term.

This session will help you prepare for and support ongoing contact with the youth's siblings, birth parents and others who are important to them. It will also provide guidance as you prepare to develop your own relationships with those who are important to the youth.

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Continued connections focuses on the importance of supporting the youth to maintain relationships with the people who matter to the youth.

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PRE-VIDEO DISCUSSION

None of us are in the world alone—we are all part of a network of people who we love and care about and who love and care about us. Research shows that having connections to others helps us to be happier, healthier and even live longer. Each of our relationships serve a different purpose in our lives. Some relationships provide support during times of stress, some provide a connection to our history, and others help us to grow and learn. Being in relationship with others helps us feel a sense of belonging.

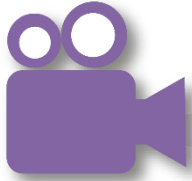
Over the course of our lives, some relationships have come and gone, while others have endured over time and space. To help you consider the importance of continued connections, take a few minutes to think about your own relationships.

- ▶ Who do you include in your family? Outside of family members, who else is part of your “network”?
- ▶ Make a list of the most important people to you. Who do you rely on for support when you need it? How have the people on your list helped you in the past?
- ▶ Thinking about extended family members and close friends, who are you closest to? Why?
- ▶ Imagine that someone has decided you can no longer have contact with some of the people on your list. You were not asked for your opinions about these decisions. How do you feel?
- ▶ Think about the longest relationship you have ever had (sibling, spouse or partner, friend)? What has that relationship looked like over time? Has it always been strong? Have you encountered and resolved issues that have come up in this relationship? Have there been some problems that have not been resolved? Have you continued your relationship despite these issues?
- ▶ Describe past relationships that you ended (whether with family members or friends). When and how did you decide to end these relationships? How easy was it to make this decision?

Just like us, youth in care are part of their own network of people. Sadly, as you would have learned about in the Transitions Right Time training, multiple transitions can cause the youth to lose touch with important people and differing opinions about the benefits of supporting the youth’s relationships with certain people can lead to decisions to cut the youth off from those they care about. Many youth have expressed fears that making a connection to a new family means they will not be able to keep the relationships they have with their parents, siblings, and other people who are important to them. Providing reassurance that you value the youth’s important relationships can help ease these concerns.

When you think about supporting a youth’s relationships with people important to them, consider the following:

- ▶ What are you concerned about? For example, you may be thinking, “I’m afraid that the youth will be let down again.”
- ▶ If your thoughts are negatively impacting your feelings toward the birth parent, what replacement thoughts might be helpful? For example, you might think, “If the youth is let down again, that is just more information for my child about this person’s capacity, and I will be there for them if that happens.”
- ▶ What are the potential benefits of a youth maintaining relationships with people they care about and who care about them?
- ▶ What do you feel most confident about when it comes to supporting these relationships?



26:19 MINUTES

VIEW the Continued Connections Right Time Episode

POST VIDEO DISCUSSION

Historically, keeping youth safe has been interpreted as keeping the youth separated from those who may have caused harm or injury; their family. We now understand that keeping a youth separated from their family results in many emotional and behavioral challenges. The youth may “act out” because they feel abandoned and uncertain of what happened or why. They may not have a sense of their identity, hearing the many messages from others who describe their “family” as “bad”, “unsafe” or “not in their best interest”.

We now understand keeping the youth separated from their family may not be in their best interests. Rather than trying to control the nature of the interactions between youth and their birth families to protect them, we know that supporting youth and their birth families as they work to repair their relationships is a better way to promote healing for everyone. Instead of reducing contact when we see grief behaviors around visits, we know increased contact is often more helpful. As an alternative to planning “final visits” when termination of parental rights is approaching, we explore open adoption arrangements.

In the video, you were reminded that most youth know where their parents and other relatives are, and in many cases, they remain in contact with them in various ways. The increased use of cell phones and social media has contributed to the ease with which youth can connect to and communicate with people who are important to them. As you heard in the video, if we attempt to stop contact with the birth family, we may be sending the message that there is something wrong with their family. The youth may see this as interference, and begin to alienate themselves from us, making relationship building even more challenging.

There are still many needs that a birth parent can continue to meet, even if they cannot be child’s caregiver. The birth parent-child relationship is unique and cannot be replaced. An adoptive parent once described how her child “comes alive” and a “light in his eyes returns” when he has contact with his birth parent. Continued connections can help preserve important early childhood memories and family history.

- ▶ What value do you see in facilitating and supporting lifelong connections between children and important people in their past? Explain.
- ▶ Why do you think lifelong connections are crucial considerations for children?
- ▶ How do you intend to address the need for lifelong connections of children who enter your home?

The Special Relationships of Siblings

Over 90% of Americans have a sibling, and it has been said the sibling relationship is the longest relationship that we will ever have. Many of the relationship and social skills that we have we learned through our interaction with our siblings. Siblings can help one another preserve family memories and provide a sense of stability in a way that others cannot. Siblings can be comforters, caretakers, role models, motivators, allies and best friends.

In many cases, siblings entering foster care have shared challenges and perhaps even abusive situations together. This can cause the sibling bond to become even stronger as they lean on each other for support. Unfortunately, siblings can become separated when they enter foster care. Typically, separation occurs when there is not a foster or kinship home that has room for all of the siblings. In other cases, decisions are made to

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Children don't come into our households as a blank slate, ever. They come with all sorts of relationships and attachments.

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~Megan Lestino

separate siblings so that the youth can receive more individual attention or when there are concerns that the interaction between siblings is unhealthy and potentially damaging.

In the vast majority of cases, separating siblings is not in their best interests. When separation happens, the sibling relationship can become disconnected and strained. As one parent shared, “Even when there are challenges associated with bringing the siblings together and allowing the space for that...it's worth it because the payoff is so great in having them feel that sense of connection to who they are”.

Shared and Co-Parenting

Research shows parents learn to nurture through the experience of being nurtured. Many parents who are involved with the child welfare system have not had good parenting role models. During parent-child separation, parents have limited opportunities to learn how to interact with their children effectively, miss opportunities to adjust to their child's developmental changes and have limited opportunities to learn how to navigate the typical frustrations of parenting (Barth and Price, 1999). In the video, you heard parents talk about the ways that they helped to model good parenting behaviors in ways that also helped to build a relationship between the birth parent and the foster parent. “Icebreaker Meetings” are another technique that is often used to help support the development of a relationship between birth and foster families.

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If I can find the good in the birth family, that means I can find good in you, because that's where you came from.

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~Debbie Schugg

Icebreaker Meetings, and other strategies such as these, can benefit all involved. Having a relationship with the birth parent will allow for better exchange of information, providing you with more information about the youth and their family. This will allow you to better support the youth's transition, select parenting strategies that will meet the youth's needs, and enhances the youth's overall well-being. Despite all of benefits to maintaining a connection to the youth's birth family, there can be challenges to developing a relationship with the youth's birth parent. The birth parent may feel anger toward you out of grief, or feel resentment toward you as a result of feeling judged, or because they may perceive you as a threat to their relationship with the youth. You may be worried about potential safety risks for the youth or for yourself, depending on the situation. It can be frustrating to deal with changes in the youth's behavior before or after visits when they are feeling triggered by past trauma. You may feel angry about what the parent did to the youth or what they allowed others to do to the child. It is important that do as much as possible to promote the relationship between you and the youth's birth parent.

Managing Your Own Feelings

Having feelings of anger or frustration toward the birth parent is a normal part of the process, but you will need to find ways to move beyond these feelings. It is important that you consider your current level of openness and comfort with the idea of having relationships with birth family so that you can determine what supports you may need along the way.

- ▶ Are you aware of your feelings toward to the birth parent?
- ▶ What underlying assumptions are you making to explain the birth parent's harmful behavior toward their child?
- ▶ Think about a time that your opinion of someone changed after you met them and heard their story. In what way did it change? What was the contact or relationship like after that? What steps could you take to understand the circumstances of the youth's separation from the birth parent from the birth parent's perspective?

Oftentimes your values, education, socioeconomic level, parenting styles and skills will be different than those of the youth's birth family. We tend to make decisions and judgements about those around us using on our values and experiences as a foundation.

- ▶ How have you handled differing viewpoints around personal values, religion, politics, lifestyles, etc. in your own family?

Even if your feelings toward the birth family don't change, it is important that you find ways to prevent your own feelings from interfering with the youth's relationships. Some strategies to help increase your sensitivity to birth families include:

- ▶ Having a belief that people can change.
- ▶ Making an assumption that things will go well.
- ▶ Understanding that the families often have different life experience than you.
- ▶ Looking for ways to break down barriers.
- ▶ Looking for positives.

Remember too, that the youth's birth parents are also experiencing many feelings and emotions toward you. They may feel threatened by you and worry that their child will forget about them. They may feel embarrassed that they have not been able to be the kind of parent that they wanted to be.

MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS WHILE MAINTAINING SAFETY

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It's always a little hard. It's always a little uncomfortable, but ultimately, working through it is for the good of the kids in your life.

~Megan Lestino

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It is not unusual for youth to want to continue their relationship with their birth parents even when it is not safe for them to live with their own family. These reasons can include other siblings still in the home, parents with lower level cognitive skills whom the youth is concerned about, or the lack of attachments between the youth and other caregiving families.

The behavior of child's parent should not always dictate if or when the child loses the relationship—this is not child centered. It can be helpful to work from the assumption that the birth parent is someone who loves your child but who has limitations and who may not always use good judgement. If the birth parent is not dangerous, the benefits of contact may outweigh the risks.

Restricting contact is often motivated by the idea that the youth needs to be protected from their “unstable” or “unsafe” birth parent, but it can be hard to know what “unstable” and “unhealthy” really mean. Without question, there are some situations that when present, should cause the caregiver to carefully consider the nature of ongoing contact. These might include previous history or risk of violence or physical harm to the child, emotional abuse of the child and parental substance abuse.

Guidelines for Making Decisions

Decisions about ongoing contact are often related to avoiding future harm, but there is no “one size fits all” approach when it comes to levels and types of contact with family members. Often the process is messy and can be uncomfortable—and can it can hard to know if we've “gotten it right”. Teens should be involved in the discussions and decision-making process. It is critical that you learn from the youth what is important to them about their relationships, what relationships they want to explore, and what that might look like for each relationship that they have.

Remember that contact with a birth parent who does not always behave in healthy ways does not necessarily mean that maintaining a connection will create more trauma for the youth. In some cases, ongoing contact comes with opportunities to model healthy responses to birth parent's unhealthy behavior. There can be nuances about their birth parents that cannot be explained, but instead must be experienced to understand. As a supportive presence, you may be able to help the youth process and cope with the disappointments that may come from navigating these challenging relationships. Over time the youth will likely comes to understand the boundaries set by adoptive parents and the need for contact in the “right amount”.

It is important to follow the youth's lead in these situations. When you engage the youth in conversation about people who are important to them you are showing them that your connection with them and their connection to the important people in their lives are equally important. Navigating this process together helps to build trust between you and the youth.

If a birth parent is unable to maintain appropriate relationship boundaries with the youth due to mental or emotional illness or if the birth parent has directed abuse or violence at the youth, you may need to consider more creative ways for the youth to maintain a connection. If it is determined that face-to-face contact is not in the youth's best interest, consider other ideas for ongoing contact such as letters or email. Social media accounts can be set up specifically for contact with birth family. Some families have found it helpful to have a separate phone line to be shared with birth family members.

It is important to revisit your decisions about contact when circumstances change.

CONNECTIONS TO FAMILY AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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Their life did not begin
the day they met us.

~Robyn Harvey

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The development of our identity is rooted in our families. As we grow up in the culture of our families, we learn about family history, norms, and values, and these lessons help us form our views of the world and of ourselves. When a young person experiences separation from their birth families, they can become disconnected from the roots of their identity. This can result in a struggle where the youth becomes forced to build their identity on missing information, making an already challenging process even more so.

While identity development does not start in adolescence, the teen years are certainly a time of greater examination of self. The teen years often include periods of “trying out” various norms and values. This is a time when important questions are asked and answered as the youth works to identify who they are.

Maintaining relationships with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and others who are important to the youth provides an avenue for the youth’s questions to be answered over time. Even when these relationships have not been strong, have been cut off or have never even existed, having shared experiences, shared history, or even simply shared genetics often provide important pieces of the youth’s identity.

How we can help

Regardless of the level of contact that a youth has with their birth family members, there are several things that you can do to help fill the gaps in information that a youth may be experiencing.

- ▶ Share all the information you have about the youth and the circumstances of their separation from the birth family. Resist the temptation to withhold details that you think may be difficult to hear or too painful for the youth. In the long run, having the information is more beneficial than being protected from it.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for the youth to share what they remember about life with their birth families. Ask about traditions around holidays or birthdays.
- ▶ Help the youth create a family tree. Although there may be missing information, start with what the youth knows and build from there. Together with the youth, come up with some ways that you might be able to find the missing details.
- ▶ Help the youth access records that may be available to them from the child welfare agency involved in their separation. State and local agency policies may vary in terms of if and how records can be accessed, but simply navigating the process can be an important part of healing.

WHAT'S LOYALTY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Encyclopedia.com defines family loyalty as “the feelings of mutual obligation, commitment, and closeness that exist among family members (e.g., parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, siblings).” Loyalty is sometimes referred to in a negative sense when describing the relationships that a youth in foster care has with birth parents or other family members. You may find yourself thinking things like “I don’t understand why he always puts his mother on a pedestal” or “Why can’t she see that her parents only keep hurting her?”. In these moments, it is important to pause and think about how you have defended or protected people who are important to you from negative or unfair comments. When youth defend their birth parents, they are doing just that—protecting the people they care about.

Understanding loyalty is an important and foundational part of supporting continued connections. There are many ways to preserve loyalty and encourage healthy relationships between all parties:

- ▶ When a child first arrives in your home, tell the child that you are not there to replace their parents. Give them permission to continue to love their parents and offer your support to both the child and the parents. Let the child know that you will be there for the child and keep them safe until they are ready to home, if that is the permanency goal.
- ▶ It is also helpful to let the child’s birth parents know this same information and offer the same support. If birth parents feel your support, they can be instrumental in giving their child permission to form a healthy relationship with you as resource parents, as well as maintain their own relationship with their child.
- ▶ Be aware that not all birth parents will be accepting of your support and may even act hostile towards you. Some birth parents might question your parenting methods or actually instigate loyalty issues with their children. Remember not to vent to the child, as they are struggling with their own emotions and loyalty issues. Recognize that the birth parent is grieving and might be transferring their anger regarding the situation onto you. Use your social worker to get support in dealing with these difficult situations.
- ▶ Remember that both you as resource parents and the child’s birth parents are important in the child’s life.
- ▶ Make sure not to criticize a child’s birth parents, including the way they parent. It is certainly appropriate to teach a child about parenting, safety, boundaries etc; however, you can do this through positive learning opportunities instead of at the expense of the birth family. A child will be much more receptive to information if they do not have to focus on defending their family or themselves.
- ▶ It is okay to discuss the birth parents’ responsibilities including why the child is in foster care and their responsibility to work through the necessary steps for the child to return home. Teaching about responsibility is not the same as finding fault or placing blame.

“Loyalty is about the connection to the goodness of the parent. This is not a competition. It’s not either/or. It’s not picking and choosing.”

~Darla L. Henry

- ▶ Recognize your own feelings towards a child's birth parents. There might be times when you find yourself angered, saddened, or horrified by a birth parent's actions; however, it is not the child's role to be your emotional support for these issues. Contact an appropriate support network to provide you with emotional support and to help explore your feelings.
- ▶ Do not throw out items a child brings with them from their birth family. Many of these items hold special meaning to a child and although we may not understand, we need to respect their value to the child. Allow a child to decide if they want to part with an item. If certain belongings are inappropriate for your household, you can have the child design a special box to store these items in that they can take with them when they leave your home. In addition, you and the child can use it as an ongoing memory box to add special mementos to during their time in your care.
- ▶ Allow the child to share their own family experiences. Remember to listen openly and without judgment.
- ▶ Most importantly, find ways of honoring the child's family traditions. Ask a child how they would celebrate holidays, what activities they did during family time, their family routines, and what they miss about being with their family. Try to incorporate some of their traditions into your own family's activities.

Excerpted from an article written by Tracy Krebs, MSW, LSW for Adoption '98 Networking for Children. Edited by K. Morris, Ph.D. Idaho Child and Family Services. March 2012. Retrieved from <https://healthandwelfare.idaho.gov/Children/AdoptionFosterCareHome/FosterAdoptiveParentResources/tabid/1899/ctl/ArticleView/mid/8362/articleId/1638/Loyalty-Issues-in-Foster-Care.aspx>.

CO-PARENTING TIPS AND TRICKS

The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) provides some guidelines for thinking about co-parenting. First, consider the advantages of shared parenting:

- ▶ Feelings of grief and loss that both a child and a birth parent might feel upon separating are minimized. Children can see their birth family is okay and still loves them—this can help a child relax.
- ▶ The child's relationship with the birth parent can be maintained.
- ▶ Foster parents can form a realistic picture of the birth parent's strengths and needs.
- ▶ The birth parents can be reassured that their child is in a nurturing and stable home.
- ▶ Foster parents can model effective parenting. By knowing what good parenting looks like, birth parents can practice parenting skills.
- ▶ Foster parents can ask birth parents about the child's schedules, fears, allergies, sleep habits, likes, and dislikes. Foster parents can also learn culturally specific child-care strategies from birth family members, which can enhance a child's cultural identity.
- ▶ Birth parents can view the foster family as a resource rather than a threat.
- ▶ Planning for visitation can be simplified.
- ▶ Transitions back into the birth parent's home can be smoother.
- ▶ After the child returns home, there can be ongoing support.

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We tell our kids we can love more than one child why couldn't you love more than one parent?

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~Debbie Schugg

The list below provides some tips and tricks to avoid the challenges of co-parenting:

- ▶ Keep journals on the activities of the children and share them with the birth family.
- ▶ Take pictures of the child's activities to share with the birth family and display pictures of the birth family in the child's room and in your home.
- ▶ Save notes, schoolwork, art projects, etc. for the birth parents.
- ▶ Facilitate phone calls between the child and the birth family.
- ▶ Provide transportation to and from visits when possible.
- ▶ Assist and encourage the birth family and the child to work on a lifebook together.
- ▶ Include birth family members in school activities such as conferences, parents' nights, and athletic events as well as in medical or dental appointments. This can allow the birth parents to practice normal parenting skills while the resource parent plays a mentoring and supportive role.
- ▶ Allow family interactions to take place in the resource family home and involve the birth parents in normal child-care tasks such as bathing, feeding, reading stories, or tucking into bed.

CARING FOR THE PARENTIFIED CHILD

Even though siblings often have a naturally caregiving role, the child welfare system has used the term “parentified” to describe siblings who are in a caregiving role. This term has come to be associated with something negative and in some cases leads to decisions to separate siblings. While it is true that some children have had to care for siblings in ways that are not considered appropriate, such as having very young children be responsible for siblings, being a caregiver for a sibling can also provide a sense of pride for a young person. Separating siblings because one child acts as a caregiver to another will not “allow the youth to be a kid”. For some youth, being a caregiver becomes part of their identity—one that they may not want to give easily or at all. When we try to remove this caregiver role, the youth may become worried or even more anxious than before. Instead, foster and adoptive parents need to be patient as the youth becomes more comfortable allowing someone else to parent their sibling.

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Letting go of guiding them was really hard. And it still is.

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~Vivianna Castillo-Roybal

Dawn Davenport suggests the following 10 tips for parenting the parentified child:

1. Set clear boundaries and define the roles of the parent and the children. State clearly what parents are responsible for in your home, and what kids are responsible for.
2. Talk with the child who has assumed the role of caretaker. Ask what it was like caring for her siblings. Acknowledge that it probably feels weird and uncomfortable not being in charge.
3. If his siblings are not living with you, try to maintain contact with the siblings to alleviate some of your child’s worry about them and guilt at not being able to care for them.
4. Plan on a gradual transition from parent to sibling.
5. Ask the child to show you how to care for his siblings and allow him to feel important and respected for his knowledge. “What type of peanut butter does the little one like?” “What soothes her?”
6. Allow her to continue some of the smaller responsibilities, such as giving baths, brushing hair, or getting snacks for her siblings.
7. Parentified children are often competent at many things. Find ways for him to use these skills outside of parenting his siblings and let him hear you bragging about him to someone else.
8. Get your child involved in activities with other children her age—school clubs, sports, church youth group, scouts, art class, etc.
9. Find and continue therapy for the child and siblings.
10. Be patient, supportive and understanding. Like other children in care, a parentified child is behaving in a manner that is normal for them, usually out of fear and survival. It will take time to trust and feel safe enough to let go.

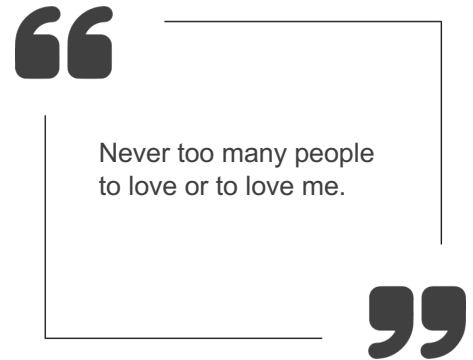
<https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/adoption-blog/parenting-tips-parentified-child-foster-care-adoption/>

ICEBREAKER MEETINGS

An icebreaker meeting is a special meeting that typically happens shortly after a youth is removed from home. Icebreaker meetings are a way to begin communication and relationship building between the youth's parents and caregivers. The meeting provides an opportunity for birth parents and foster parents (or other caregivers) to meet each other and share information about the youth.

Icebreaker meetings can:

- ▶ reduce parents' anxiety about their youth's placement and well-being;
- ▶ reinforce the parents' role(s) as parent and establish caregivers as part of the team working to support the child and reunify the family;
- ▶ reassure youth that their parents and caregivers are all working together, giving youth permission to build relationships with new caregivers while maintaining their relationship with their parents.



~April Dinwoodie

What to do at an Icebreaker Meeting

- ▶ Introduce each participant and clarify roles and responsibilities of each
- ▶ Ask foster parent to share information with the birth parent including:
 - How the youth is doing in their home so far;
 - Assurance that, "I am not trying to take your place";
 - Other adults and siblings (birth/adoptive/foster) in the home;
 - Basic structure/rules of the home and daily routine;
- ▶ The parent(s) will be invited to share information about the child such as:
 - Favorite foods
 - Preferred activities
 - Medical concerns
 - School related issues
 - Preferred ways of communicating with others
 - Important people to the youth
 - Comforting rituals
- ▶ Discuss a communication plan that is appropriate and is comfortable for all parties, including the method(s) of communication.
- ▶ If the youth is participating, provide an opportunity for them to ask questions or to express desires regarding on-going activities and contact with important people.

RESOURCES

These resources can provide some additional information that may help you explore Continued Connections further.

- ▶ Making a Difference by Maintaining Connections**
Article from *Fostering Perspectives*, a newsletter sponsored by the North Carolina Division of Social Services, the North Carolina Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, SAYSO (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out), and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work. The article describes ways to work with birth parents and maintain children's connections to them by using "out of the box" thinking and approaches.
<http://fosteringperspectives.org/fpv20n2/Foster.htm>
- ▶ Birth Parents With Trauma Histories And The Child Welfare System: A Guide For Resource Parents**
Provides suggestions that resource parents can use to recognize how trauma may have impacted the way birth parents parent.
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/birth-parents-trauma-histories-and-child-welfare-system-guide-resource-parents>
- ▶ Ten Myths and Realities of Sibling Adoptions**
Reviews the most common reasons why siblings are separated and shares information about why these reasons may be misguided.
https://www.adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/ten-myths-and-realities-of-sibling-adoptions.pdf
- ▶ Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships With Birth Families**
Children and youth who are adopted need to maintain relationships with their birth families, previous caregivers, or other important connections, and it is vital that their parents support them in doing so. Nurturing these relationships is in the best interests of the child, as ongoing contact with birth family members may minimize or resolve his or her feelings of grief and loss due to separation. This bulletin is intended to provide professionals with information to help children, youth, and adoptive families develop and maintain appropriate and evolving connections.
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/bulletins_maintainrelationships.pdf
- ▶ Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family**
Children and youth who have been adopted and maintain relationships with their birth families, caregivers, and other important people in their lives benefit in significant ways. Adoptive parents can play an instrumental role in helping their children maintain contact with their birth families or other important caregivers. This factsheet is intended to help adoptive parents support children, youth, and birth families in strengthening their relationships.
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/factsheets_families_maintainrelationships.pdf
- ▶ Searching for Birth Relatives**
This factsheet provides guidance to adopted persons and birth families on the search process and information access as well as resources for further help in conducting a successful search. This factsheet is designed to address the concerns of both adopted persons who are searching for birth parents or other birth relatives and birth parents (both mothers and fathers) who want to locate a child who was adopted. While not a complete "how to" guide to searching, this factsheet provides information on the different types of searches and issues that might arise during searching.
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_search.pdf

CREATING AN ACTION PLAN

Now, it is time to develop a plan to address those areas you would like to change. Consider the points / questions below, as well as your self-assessment and classroom material, when identifying a plan to improve your ability to support your youth's continued connections.

- ❖ The following characteristics have been deemed *most critical* for success when it comes to Continuing Connections. Please reflect upon your self-assessment for each of the following characteristics: advocacy, compassion, honoring relationships / attachment, risk-taking, and self-awareness and self-regulation.
 - ▶ Which characteristics are your strengths?
 - ▶ Which characteristics are less well developed?
 - ▶ Choose at least two characteristics in need of development. How do you see these characteristics impacting your ability to navigate the relationships in your youth's life?

- ❖ There is a lot to consider when thinking about how to support a youth's continued connections. Consider the following questions as you prepare to develop your action plan:
 - ▶ What is your comfort level in supporting continued connections?
 - ▶ Are there areas that you need more information about to increase your comfort level?
 - ▶ How can you include your own supports in the process?

- ❖ It is not uncommon for foster or adoptive parents to have feelings of anger or frustration with birth parents or others who may have hurt the youth. You will need to be aware of your feelings and have a plan for how you will prevent your own feelings from interfering with the youth's relationships. Think about what you will do to be more prepared to manage your own feelings by considering the following questions:
 - ▶ How will you maintain awareness of your feelings toward the birth family?
 - ▶ What strategies will you use to regulate yourself when these feelings interfere with the relationship building process?
 - ▶ How prepared are you to address your self-care needs when navigating the relationship is especially challenging?

- ❖ When supporting continued connections, it is important to consider your expectations related to boundaries. Ongoing contact is often thought of as a continuum from closed or very restricted to open and more fluid. Consider your thoughts about maintaining boundaries in the relationship that you and the youth will have:
 - ▶ Are you comfortable sharing your contact information with birth family members?
 - ▶ What parameters will be needed? For example, will you establish specific times when calls will be accepted or will this be more organic?

- ❖ Your youth may experience disappointments in their relationships with birth family members. Consider your level of readiness to in supporting your youth in these cases:
 - ▶ Are you able to stay neutral and avoid judgements?
 - ▶ In what ways are you prepared to help your youth come to their own conclusions about the challenges they experience in their relationships?

- ▶ How forgiving are you willing to be when your youth resolves conflicts with those important to them?
- ❖ When developing your plan, consider expanding your views by including plans do one of the following:
 - ▶ Network with other resource families who engage in openness practices with birth families and discuss the positives and challenges they have had over the years.
 - ▶ Participate in visitation with birth parents or birth relatives, if applicable.
 - ▶ Locate a birth parent support group and request to talk to birth family members.

Use the Action Plan grid to identify areas that you would like to work on to help you support continued connections for your youth. List each area on the grid and answer the associated questions to develop your plan.

What do I plan to do to improve my ability to support continued connections for my youth?

Area of Focus	What do I need to do to improve this area?	What help will I need?	Who can help me?
Self-Assessment— Areas to improve	I need to explore learning more about why youth in foster care “need” or “want” to be connected to family who treated them poorly.	I need to hear about the experiences that other parents have had with this.	I can talk to the other parents in my support group or ask my youth’s caseworker to connect me to another parent who has had more experience helping youth maintain connections.
Maintaining boundaries while supporting connections for the youth			
Improving my relationships with birth family members			
Other (list):			
Other (list):			