

FOSTER CARE SOLUTIONS

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR
**FOSTER
PARENTS**

Based on Boys Town's
Common Sense Parenting®



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Building a Relationship with Your Foster Child

Tom walked into the kitchen where Chris, his foster mother, was preparing dinner.

“Look who’s here!” said Chris. “The best basketball player around! Congratulations on making the varsity Tom. I’m making spaghetti. Your brother said we should have something special for dinner to celebrate.”

“Thanks Chris. I am so jazzed! This could mean I get a scholarship!” Tom said, smiling.

“Maybe. You worked hard this year and you deserved to make the varsity! Do you want to play pro ball someday?”

“Absolutely,” said Tom. “Maybe with the Lakers, if they’d have me.”

“They’d be lucky to get you! Would you mind helping me get the table set so we can get everybody in here for dinner and hear about your day?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks, Tom. Whew! We haven’t had this kind of excitement around here in a long time. I’ve never had a meal with a future NBA player before!” Chris said.

“Trust me, you’ll do fine,” Tom said with a laugh.

Taking the time to build relationships with the children in your care is an important part of your job as a Foster Parent. And as you can see from the example, making that connection with foster children can be as simple as using praise and talking with them every day.

Many children in foster care have not yet learned how to develop positive relationships. Others misuse what they have learned, and some simply don’t understand how it’s done. It might not be easy for them to make and keep friends. They might have problems getting along with adults in authority (parents, teachers, employers, and others), and they also might have trouble forming attachments to those that care for them.

Developing and nurturing relationships is an essential key to living a rewarding and happy life. Young people who have not learned these necessary skills are missing the friendship and love they need from others as they grow. That is why building positive relationships with children in your care is so critical. Not only are you teaching them how to develop healthy relationships with others, but you also are creating an atmosphere of trust and security between yourself and your foster child. This will help you in your teaching and make it more likely that youngsters will benefit from their experiences in foster care. And perhaps more importantly, it helps children develop a

positive set of values that they can use forever, and in any situation, as a basis for making their own decisions.

Why Kids Can't Connect

As we've said, many children in foster care have a difficult time connecting with others in positive ways. Their relationships with parents, teachers, neighbors, and even friends may be characterized by apathy, defiance, dishonesty, and aggression. Some foster children have learned these behaviors from the adults in their lives, who, for a variety of reasons, have failed to be good role models. Or, young people may have developed these behaviors on their own, as a way to cope and survive in a difficult world. Whatever the reasons, these children must first learn how to trust and connect (or attach) with others before they can begin developing and building healthy relationships – and reaping the benefits that come from them.

Attachment

Two respected researchers and authors on the subject of attachment, Marshall Klaus and John Kennell (1976), have defined attachment “as an affectionate bond between two individuals that endures through space and time and serves to join them emotionally.” By the time most children enter foster care, they have been separated from many of the people with whom they have built relationships: parents, stepparents, relatives, babysitters, neighbors, friends, and others. In addition, these same children may have lived in other settings like shelters, hospitals, or

other foster homes. These children are at the greatest risk of having attachment problems because they worry about whom to trust to care for them.

What's important for Foster Parents to understand is that children who do not develop a secure primary attachment relationship (with mom, dad, grandparent, or another caregiver) are more likely to have problems with relationships, and these problems are likely to get worse when they enter foster care. The foster child who has been moved many times will have greater problems developing trusting relationships. Child welfare professionals used to think it was best to move a child from a stable foster care home so that the child wouldn't "get too close" to the foster family. We now know that this attachment, in fact, is necessary and should be encouraged with any caregiver

who provides the right nurturing environment for the child.

Developing and nurturing relationships is an essential key to living a rewarding and happy life.

One of your toughest challenges as a Foster Parent is to accept the reality that, even though you may give foster children an abundance of kindness, care, and love, it's likely that they will not respond to you in the same manner all of the time.

Because of this, you might begin to feel frustrated, view yourself as a "bad" Foster Parent, or even want to reject the child. Don't despair! These are normal feelings that most Foster Parents feel at some time when children don't show gratitude and appreciation for all that

you are doing for them. Our experience has taught us that when Foster Parents understand that these kinds of reactions are typical and not any fault of their own, it is much easier to not take a foster child's rejections personally.

What can you do when faced with this kind of situation? The best answer is to "stay the course." This means you should continue to build relationships, use the teaching tools described in this book, and remain consistent with consequences. A word of caution: Don't focus on these factors to the extent that you neglect or forget to show your foster child affection and how much you really care about him or her. Doing this will only damage a relationship. Balance is the key here. Unfortunately, you might not see the fruits of your labor while a child is in your care. By doing the things discussed here, you are planting a seed that might help the child learn to trust and attach to others later in life – whether that's at home with his or her family or with someone else in another placement.

Importance of Attachment

All of us need to know that someone cares about us and loves us, and that others can be trusted to help us with problems that arise in life. This is especially true with children in foster care. According to Vera Fahlberg (1991), another author who has worked with hundreds of foster children, having a strong attachment with a caregiver allows children to develop trust in others and, ultimately, in themselves. They begin to have confidence that the world is a safe place where they can explore and have their basic needs met. These early relationships influence the

child's physical and intellectual development and form the foundation for his or her psychological development. The child's earliest attachments become the example or blueprint for future relationships. When a responsive caregiver consistently meets a child's needs, it strengthens the development of secure attachments and a child's sense of relating to others.

The benefits of strong, healthy attachments for children are many. According to Fahlberg, children who develop these kinds of attachments are more likely to:

- Attain full intellectual potential.
- Sort out perceptions.
- Think logically.
- Develop social emotions.
- Develop a conscience.
- Trust others.
- Be resilient.
- Become self-reliant.
- Cope better with stress and frustration.
- Reduce feelings of jealousy.
- Overcome common fears and worries.
- Have increased feelings of self-worth.

One of the difficult realities about being a Foster Parent is that if you do your job well, your foster child will probably leave your home for a more permanent family. (Although, today, more Foster Parents are adopt-

ing foster children than ever before.) But just as you have created a safe environment that helped the child develop an attachment, you also can help that child learn that it is safe to leave and connect to other people. You have helped the child establish a strong foundation. Children may be concerned about being disloyal to you as they start to develop stronger attachments to their own parents or to a new permanent parent. That is why **they need clear messages and ongoing teaching from you about the benefits of caring for many people instead of only one.**

Warning Signs of Attachment Problems

On the other hand, if a child's basic needs have not been met, or have been met in a very inconsistent manner, it can lead to attachment problems. The child may conclude that he or she cannot depend on others to meet his or her needs.

The following is a list of some warning signs that may indicate your foster child has an attachment problem. Some behaviors to be aware of include:

- Displaying superficially engaging and charming behaviors – they may “fake” their affection.
- Being overly affectionate with strangers.
- Showing developmental lags – the child may be interested in games or toys that much younger children like, or they may have tantrums like younger children do.
- Avoiding eye contact.

- Destroying own and/or others' belongings.
- Being uncomfortable with physical touch.
- Exhibiting cruelty toward siblings, foster brothers or sisters, or classmates.
- Being cruel toward animals.
- Having problems developing friendships with other children.
- Lacking “cause and effect” thinking – they don't understand the consequences of their behavior. They usually think it is someone else's fault.
- Overly clinging or demanding of your attention.
- Hoarding or gorging food.
- Fighting to control every aspect of the environment.
- Stealing and lying behaviors.
- Showing no remorse for negative behaviors.
- Having poor impulse control – they have trouble resisting the urge to do whatever comes to their minds.

Developing Healthy Attachments

You have two tasks in this area when a foster child enters your home. The first task is to help the child develop a healthy attachment with you so that continued growth and development can occur. The second task is to help the child build on the attachments that he or she has already developed. That way, the improvements the child has

achieved in your care can be carried over to future caregivers (birth parents, adoptive parents, or new Foster Parents).

The first step in the process of building healthy attachments is to help your foster child adjust to your home. Some suggestions for doing this are:

Be honest about the placement.

With the help of the caseworker, tell your foster child as much as you can about why he or she was placed in your home. Remember to take into account the child's age and ability to understand family problems.

Be sure the child arrives with some personal possessions.

This helps lessen the trauma of moving from a familiar home to an unfamiliar home. If your foster child arrives without any familiar possessions, talk together about some of his or her "favorite things" (stuffed animals, blanket, toys). Purchasing one of these items may help your foster child feel more secure in your home and will help to build your relationship with him or her.

Keep your foster child active.

Plan family activities and outings with the child.

Be consistent.

Set up clear house rules, routines, and expectations. This structure will enable your foster child to feel more "in control" because he or she will know what's expected instead of being told each time.

Be supportive and empathetic.

Provide your foster child with opportunities to express his or her grief through artwork, journaling, and discussion. Be understanding and keep in mind that the child needs time to heal.

Praise! Praise! Praise!

Find even small behaviors to praise – compliment and show approval verbally and nonverbally.

Linda Bayless and Lillie Love of the Child Welfare Institute (1990) have developed other ways Foster Parents can help a child adjust to a new home and begin to build healthy attachments. Some of these are:

Identify activities and behaviors that represent your family, and include your foster child in them.

For example, if each member of your family has a special place at the table and in the family room, then help the foster child to feel like part of your family by giving him or her one, too.

Identify something each parent can do every day with the child for 15 minutes that will be pleasurable for the child and parent.

This activity may be reading together, talking quietly about the day, or watching television. The key is that it should be enjoyable for you and the child.

Identify a special role and responsibility for the child in your family.

This can be something as simple as assisting with setting the table, helping to feed pets, and so on.

Help the child to have mementos and memories of all significant people.

Work with the child's family and caseworker to gather photographs, special toys, and keepsakes.

Help children talk about their families.

Encourage your foster child to talk about his or her family (activities they did together, trips, family traditions, etc.).

Help children express feelings of loss or missing their families.

Be open with your foster child about the times when you've felt a loss and encourage the child to express grief and sadness through journaling, writing letters, and other ways that help to overcome these feelings. Tell the child it's okay to feel this way, but unhealthy to dwell on it.

Identify non-harmful ways the child can express anger, frustration, or sadness.

We'll talk more in Chapter 16 about Teaching Self-Control, how to teach your foster child to express anger appropriately through developing a "Staying Calm Plan."

Help children to remain connected to and have contact with significant people from their past.

This may include parents, grandparents, siblings, or former Foster Parents. Talk with your foster child's caseworker to identify appropriate modes of communication (personal visits, phone contact, letter writing, etc.).

Identify familiar and pleasurable things from the child's past and incorporate those things into your home.

These can be things like special holiday traditions, ethnic foods, or favorite activities.

Contact the Foster Care agency you are working for to seek professional help for the foster child when needed.

If you feel overwhelmed or believe that your foster child has a severe problem, notify your caseworker. He or she may contact a professional (psychiatrist, psychologist, therapist, or other mental health provider) for help.

Boundaries

Children in your care also may have difficulty identifying and setting proper boundaries. They may make poor choices about friends, perhaps trusting people they shouldn't trust or distancing themselves from others who may be good influences. That is why, many times, the most serious problems foster kids bring with them involve poor boundaries and sexual activity. These sexual issues can be unhealthy and extremely hazardous for all children. Besides the physical risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, there's also the risk of further emotional pain and the possibility of repeated abuse that can result from such behaviors.

Setting proper boundaries with others is an area where children find change very difficult. They know how they were expected or allowed to act at home, and they may not have any idea what behaviors are unacceptable in your home. Therefore, children sometimes are unable to accept and/or feel comfortable with what we consider normal

relationships with family or friends. They need your clear guidance and support in the form of love, patience, teaching, and setting and enforcing expectations.

When children demonstrate inappropriate boundaries with others, it may present difficult situations for you as a Foster Parent. For example, foster children might try to cross over boundaries that properly separate you as a parent from the children in your home or try to violate the boundaries of your own children or other foster children in the home. Examples include children touching adults sexually, telling other children about explicit sexual behaviors, or trying to create tension between the foster parents by wanting an exclusive relationship with one of them.

Children who make poor choices about boundaries may be used to adults treating them as peers, friends, or as equals. These children have not been taught that in an appropriate adult-child relationship, adults must be authority figures, providing guidance and helping children meet their needs. As a Foster Parent, it is crucial for you to take on a clear “adult role” that defines you as a teacher, leader, and protector of the kids in your care. That doesn’t mean you must become excessively strict or harsh with your foster child. You can be a responsible caregiver and an effective role model and still have a good relationship with the children in your care. Developing solid relationships with kids can open the lines of communication and help children be more open to you and your teaching.