



Foster Care Forum

Waukesha County
Health & Human Services
March 2009



Building a Positive Relationship with Birth Parents By Donna Foster

Foster parents are taught about the things children feel when experiencing loss. We are taught in MAPP about the grief cycle and how to help children through each stage. Yet we are not always taught that birth parents go through their own grief cycle. This is critical information—before we can hope to build a relationship with the birth parents we need to understand how they are feeling.

To give foster parents the tools they need to build more constructive relationships with birth parents, I'd like to share the following suggestions, which are organized according to Charles Horejsi's ideas about the cycle of birth parent grief (see sidebar below).

Birth Parent's Grief Process

Shock. Parents are in disbelief. The words people are saying don't sink in or make sense. Parents feel like they are sleepwalking. The only thing on their mind is that their child is gone. Behaviors of parents may include: shaking, screaming, crying, or swearing. They are overwhelmed with worries about their child. Parents may promise the social worker anything without understanding what they promised. Parents may be in denial and are sure the child will return tomorrow.

Protest. Grief shows itself more physically. The parents may feel sadness or anger and the symptoms could be upset stomach and low or no appetite. Parents may have headaches, insomnia, and exhaustion. They may be angry at everyone. The parents may make demands or threats. They may swear or cry for no apparent reason. It may be easier to blame others for the situation than to accept their responsibility. This could be a way of coping with despair and depression.

Adjustment. In the adjustment phase things start to settle down. Adjustment occurs sooner if the parents have an ally, such as the social worker and foster parent. The parents do not worry about the children's safety or loyalty if rust in the foster parent has developed. The child becomes the focus of the team. Those assisting the birth parents can be the social workers, foster parents, guardian ad litem, therapists and other community resources. The parents build their parenting skills and actively participate in co-parenting their children with the foster parents. The social worker, foster parent, and birth parent develop a strong Shared Parenting team. The parents fulfill their obligations and meet the case plan goals.

Adapted from Charles Horejsi's "Working with Biological Parents"

Stage: Shock

At this stage of the grief cycle birth parents need to know their children are being taken care of by kind people who are not trying to replace them. No matter what caused their children to be placed outside their home, parents still care about their children and feel they should be in their care. Foster parents can help by meeting the birth parents face-to-face when children are being placed with them. If a meeting is not possible, call the birth parents after the children are placed. During meetings and phone calls foster parents should:

Start the conversation. Do not say "I understand how you are feeling." This could anger birth parents who feel no one can understand how they are feeling. A better approach would be to introduce yourself by saying, "Karen, I am Donna. I am taking care of your child until he can come home to you. He is missing you. I felt you wanted to know who was taking care of your son."

Be ready for serious anger. Do not let angry words stop your compassion. The birth parents have lost control over their child. They are at a

loss as to how to fight for themselves. Demonstrating that you understand this frustration is a first step in the development of trust between adults.

Stage: Protest

The birth parents may let the foster parents know in no uncertain terms that they are their children's only parents. They may threaten the foster parents not to harm their children. This is a method of trying to maintain control. Here are some ways foster parents can strengthen their relationship with protesting birth parents:

Assure birth parents you will not harm their children. Birth parents benefit from hearing these words from the foster parents. They may have heard or read scary stories about foster parents.

Be humble. Let the birth parents be the knowledgeable one when talking about their child. Example: "You know your child better than anyone. How do you want me to care for your child while he is here?"

Understand the birth parent's anger as an expression of grief. Do not show your own anger. Instead, show compassion. This can be difficult if the children have been neglected or abused. Your feelings are your own and should not be overlooked. But as foster parents, you must remember the child loves his or her parents. The plan is almost always reunification. Use your own feelings to motivate and support the birth parents as they learn how to parent their children in healthy ways.

Use Reflective Listening. Birth parents need to be heard, not judged. Reflective listening is the practice of repeating or paraphrasing what the person you are talking to has just said, reflecting back the emotions you are hearing. Example: "I hate that my children are staying with strangers!" Reflective response: "You sound worried that people you don't know will not know how to care for your children."

Foster parents' role is to listen and provide creative ways for the birth parents to actively parent their children. When they do this, Shared Parenting is taking root.

Don't sell yourself as wonderful, superior, or the child's salvation. Birth parents may feel embarrassed or threatened by the foster family's home. Birth parents may believe foster parents are in it for the money.

Birth parents need to hear from foster parents that they are here to help families reunite. Birth parents need to hear again and again that their children need them and that material things aren't important.

Stage: Adjustment

After birth parents feel recognized by the child's foster parents they become more open to being involved in the parenting of their children while they are in foster care. Here are some specific ways to communicate to birth parents that they are included in their children's care.

Ask birth parents what questions they have for you. Birth parents may want to know: Do the children have a room by themselves? Who bathes them? What do you tell them about why they are in foster care? How do you let them know we love them? When can I talk to them? Are you going to change them so that they are more like your family? Do you want to keep our kids?





Jesse's Corner

Jesus Mireles
Manager of the Children and
Family Division

I was recently informed about several items that I would like to share with you. The first is the "Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008-Educational Provisions". This federal law promotes educational stability for foster children. Child Welfare agencies must include "a plan for ensuring the educational stability of the child while in foster care" as part of every child's case plan. It requires the Child Welfare Agency to consider school related issues when a child is in foster care. I think a child should remain in their home school and continue with the same educational programming whenever possible. In addition, we have asked foster parents to temporarily transport children to their home school. Some of our foster parents have volunteered to provide this transportation. If that occurs, I would suggest you talk to your social worker to adjust your foster care rate accordingly. If you have, any questions or concerns, please feel free to speak to your social worker. The second item has to do with children who are in foster care that were born in another county and not United States citizen. As some of you may know, we have a responsibility to protect children regardless of their citizen status. However, children that are not U.S. citizens are not entitled to most state or federal programs or funding other children in foster care normally receive. As a result, we work with volunteer organizations or non-profit organizations to obtain services and support. Most recently, I was informed that children in this situation can get assistance to become a legal U.S. citizen, however the children need to have a permanency plan other than reunification, have the CHIPS Dispositional Order remain in affect and it is anticipated that they will not be returning to their country of origin. We have several children in this category and are in the process of assisting them in obtaining legal status. We will be sharing more information as needed. Finally, I have heard several of our birth families maintain in contact with our foster parents and continue to receive support after their case is closed. I think this is very positive and reinforces our shared parenting concepts. There may be situations when the birth parents do not follow through as agreed upon (not returning to pick up their child) or you have child protective concerns. In those situations, I believe you need to contact our Department as soon as possible. I know you may not want to jeopardize your relationship with the parents and are concerned about how this will affect your relationship; however, we need to make sure the children are safe and the parents get the assistance and support they need. I am very pleased to report that when this has occurred, our foster parents have contacted us immediately. I appreciate this effort and encourage anyone else in this situation to do the same. As always, you can talk to your social worker about this.

In closing, I would like to remind you of some upcoming events and encourage you to attend our annual meeting on March 12 from 5:30 to 8:30 (potluck) at Steinhafel's in Waukesha, our Shared Parenting Training March 24 and 26 at the Human Services Center for all new foster parents and Sexual Behavior in Children a Caregiver's Guide on May 16th from 9-4 pm location to be determined. Our annual ribbon tying will be on May 5 at 5:00 followed by a light dinner and then a training on Life Books from 6:00 to 8:00 at the Human Services Center.

Jesse

Building a Positive Relationship with Birth Parents—Continued

Ask birth parents about their children. Ask questions such as: How do you want us to take care of them? What do your children like to eat? What allergies do they have? Are they allergic to any medications, mold, animals, etc? What fears do they have? What do you do to calm them? What do they need with them at bedtime, such as special blankets, pillows, stuffed animals? What are their social needs? Are they close to any teachers, bus drivers, or other family members? Who are they? What do you want the children to call us?

Develop an action plan for parenting the children together. When questions are answered you can, in collaboration with the children's social worker, develop an action plan that might include phone calls, family-oriented visits at the agency, at parks, and in time, at the foster home. Birth parents can join their children and the foster parents at medical appointments, school activities and meetings, church functions, community activities, birthdays, holidays, and summer activities.



When the birth parents are attending these functions, foster parents should introduce them as the children's parents and ask doctors and school personnel to discuss their children's needs with the birth parents. This helps the birth parents practice parenting and allows foster parents to play a supportive role.

After Reunification

If shared parenting is practiced, the self-esteem of the birth parents is heightened and a positive, ongoing relationship with the foster family created. After reunification the birth parents will most likely desire a continued relationship with the family who cared for their children. The foster parents can offer to take the role of aunt, uncle, and cousins.

They can offer to give respite to birth parents by occasionally caring for the family's children.



Reunification is stressful. The support of the foster parents can help the family succeed in staying together. Staying involved after the children return home also helps foster families with their own emotions.

A slow transition is healthy for all of the children and the adults who love them. Everyone wins!

Donna Foster, an author, national trainer, and consultant, lives in Marshville, NC.

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**Shared Parenting for Waukesha County
Foster Parents
March 24 and 26, 2009
6:00 to 9:00 pm
Brookfield Room @
Waukesha County Human Services
500 Riverview Avenue
Enter the Building at Door #6
To register call: Shari @262-548-7267**

**This training is highly recommended for
all county foster parents**

Decorative border with clover icons. Text inside:

**Pre-Placement Training
for Prospective Foster Parents**

March 5, 2009	6-9 PM
March 19, 2009	6-9 PM
April 2, 2009	6-9 PM
April 16, 2009	6-9 PM

All Classes are held in the Brookfield Room G137 in the Human Services Center located at 500 Riverview Avenue.

Please enter the building at door 6. Call Shari Rather at (262) 548-7267 to register.

Fostering a Child Whose Parent Is in Jail or Prison From the Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center

There may be as many as two million children in the U.S. who have one or more parents in prison or jail. That's close to two out of every 100 children, according to a review from Wright & Seymour, 2000. Many of these children live with the other parent or with the other parent or with extended family members during the parent's period of incarceration.

But many of these children also find themselves in the foster care system. One factor is the exponential growth of women in prison and the number of single-parent households.

The female prison population grew 757 percent between 1977 and 2004. Most of the increases in female imprisonment can be traced to the "war on drugs." More women are being sent to prison for drug offenses. According to the Women's Prison Association, 74 percent are incarcerated for non-violent crimes.

There are also significant racial disparities in the prison population. African Americans are disproportionately represented in the prison population, just as they are in the foster care population.

The events that bring children to foster care—including the very act of being removed from one's family—create emotional upheaval in most children who enter the system.

Additionally, most studies conclude that the incarceration of a parent engenders a unique grief which compounds that of entering foster care.

Children of incarcerated women are more likely to be adopted and less likely to qualify for family preservation services. It is difficult enough for women to establish themselves in an apartment, find employment, and participate in a community let alone try to rebuild a family with their reunited children.

Here are some suggestions for you to help your children cope:

- It is important to examine your own feelings about criminal activity and drug abuse. How can you help both the child in your care, and his or her parent if you find it difficult to accept something the parent has done? Would it help to talk to a trusted pastor or rabbi, your case worker, or a counselor to come to grips with your own feelings?
- Children whose parents are incarcerated are likely to be grieving. They may:
 - Identify with the parent in jail and feel guilt and shame about the crime.
 - Carry a social stigma and find themselves treated differently at school, in the church, or in the community.
 - Have intrusive thoughts about the prison or jail where the parent now lives.
 - View their future as uncertain, and hinge their emotional state on court dates and outcomes which are often slow.
 - Have flashbacks to the traumatic arrest.
 - Experience embarrassment, fear and anxiety.
 - Be angry or in a state of hyper-vigilance.
 - Show signs of sadness, regression, or eating or sleep disorders.
- Talk with your children in age appropriate ways about these feelings and reactions.
- Prepare yourself to answer some difficult questions. It will help you to respond truthfully and appropriately if you give some forethought to what they may ask. Some of the issues you may want to address are:
 - Why is the parent in prison.
 - What happened.
 - What will happen next.
- It is important to reassure your children that the parent did not leave because of something that they did.
- Finally, honor and preserve the child's connection to the parent in prison.

Visits between children in foster care and their parents maintain important family relationships, give social workers a chance to assess and document birth family progress, and are strongly tied to successful family reunification. This is often a daunting task for foster parents, but here are some guidelines that may help:

- Talk to your social worker about visiting the parent.
- Learn the visitation regulations in the jail or prison you will be visiting. Find out if there will be face-to-face contact, or if the child will have to view her parent with glass separating them and talk on phones; find out if there will be metal detectors or body searches and if the child is allowed

to bring any mail or gifts.

- Visit the prison or jail on your own before you bring the child. It will help you to deal with reactions which you may not want to display in front of the child who is already afraid and anxious about the experience of visiting mom or dad in jail.
- Tell the child what to expect at the visit in age-appropriate ways. Let them know that there may be only one hug, that they may not be able to bring anything to the parent, or there may be long lines and time limits on the visit.
- Some jails and prisons have special family rooms and accommodate children in special ways. Make the appointment ahead of time with the prison to find out about any special accommodations which are made for children. A foster parent tells the story of a jail that videotaped inmates reading children's books and gave the videos and copies of the books to the child's family. The child could read the books at home along with the foster parent while they watched the parent reading the books on video tape.
- Some children want to see their parents and some will have a difficult time dealing with their parents' incarceration. However, most studies indicate that it is important for children to maintain as much contact as possible, and that reunification is more likely to be successful if that contact has been maintained.

Resources

The Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center has the following books available to borrow:

Children with Parents in Prison
Wish You Were Here

Resources used for this article include:

Family Ties Through Prison Walls

<http://www.connectforkids.org/node/2916>

Foster Children's Visits for Parents in Prison

<http://www.cga.ct.gov/2002/olrdata/kid/rpt/2002-R-0184.htm>

Hard Data on Hard Times; Empirical Data On Maternal Incarceration, Foster Care and Visitation

http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/245_461.pdf?bulletin=30&token=1642

Mumola, C.J. (2000). *Bureau of Justice Statistics special report: Incarcerated parents and their children.*

Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice

North Carolina's Child Welfare Newsletter, Understanding Parents in Prison

http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/cspn/vol7_no1/understand_parents_prison.htm

E-bulletin of the Child Welfare League of America, *New Funding for Children of Prisoners*

<http://www.cwla.org/wer4kdz/issue.asp?ISSUEID=38>

Wright, L.E. & Seymour, C.B. (2000). *Working with children and families separated by incarceration: A handbook for child welfare agencies.*



The **Milwaukee Bucks** have donated to us 75 tickets to the **March 18th game at 7:00** at the **Bradley Center**.

If you would like to attend please call or email Shari ASAP at either 548-7267 or srather@waukeshacounty.gov.

If you take tickets please use them, we will not get donations like this if people do not attend.

Annual Foster Parent Potluck and Meeting

On March 12, 2009
From 5:30 PM to 8:30 PM
at
Steinhafel's in Waukesha
Corner of Hwy F and 94

Come and learn about what is going on in Foster Care. Get your new Foster Parent Handbook and tote.

Hear about ongoing training requirements, budget issues, transportation, annual statistics, team meetings and much more.

Reserve your spot now: Call Shari at (262)548-7267.



March 2009 Foster Parent Spotlight

Jewel & Mark Stern



Jewel grew up in Ohio and Mark grew up in Wisconsin, they met via the internet and have been together since 1998. Mark has two children ages 29 & 26, with two grandchildren ages 7 and 10 months. Jewel and Mark currently have a foster to adopt daughter who is almost 3. Jewel works at TCI and Mark is self-

employed. As a family, they enjoy going to the zoo and attending festivals.

Jewel was the initiator when it came to being foster parents. She was interested in becoming a foster/adoptive parent after learning she was not able to have children of her own. She wanted to share her love and joy of life with a child who needed her. Mark respected Jewel's dream

of becoming a foster parent and began going through the classes with her.

Since becoming foster parents, the Sterns have had 3 placements – "The fourteen year old we had was delightful and we still have a relationship, and our current placement we are hoping to adopt." Their experience this far has been wonderful and with the support of family and friends, they are looking forward to fostering more children. The hardest thing they have found being foster parents is that it is challenging to take a complete stranger into their home and learn all their personality/quirks that they bring with them. "It is fascinating and frustrating at the same time."

"Attending different foster parent training classes has been a great help for us, and we can't wait to attend more." "The classes are all very accurate as what to expect but be prepared because living it is shocking at times & the friends you make in class *will* be your greatest resources."



Help needed in the Foster Parent Clothing Closet. We need assistance in hanging and sorting clothing. Please call Shari if you have a few hours to help out at (262)548-7267.

BIKES AND MORE BIKES...we have several smaller two-wheel bikes that need a home. Please call Shari to reserve one for your foster child.

elry, poems, stories and "Sculpey" figures. Last year we also included decorated suitcases and canvas shopping bags, as well as decorated furniture. We have also had a flautist, poet, singer, sketch artist and a drum circle that have performed at past Shows. If you can sing, dance or play a musical instrument, we would love to have you be part of the program on November 12. From young children to older teenagers, all art efforts are included in the Show. The committee also has some funds that can be used to purchase supplies for those young artists who need them. Please contact your social worker if you need supplies.

Please think about being a part of this year's Show and mark your calendars for November 12. We'd love to have you join us. The young people who have participated in the past have enjoyed having the chance to show others their artistic efforts. We look forward to your involvement. If any young people, parents or caregivers have any questions, please contact your worker. More information about the Show will be included in future Newsletters. Thank you.

CALLING ALL CREATIVE KIDS!! DO YOU WANT TO BE FAMOUS? IT'S YOUR CHANCE PUT YOUR ARTWORK ON DISPLAY



It's not too early to begin working on your art work. The ROKs committee is having its fourth annual non-competitive Art Show on **November 12th** in the **Brookfield Room of the Human Services Center**. Every year we display art done by the talented kids who work with WCDHHS. Some of the artwork has included drawings, paintings, sculptures, jew-

Happy St. Patrick's Day

Contact Numbers:

Waukesha H & HS
262-548-7212

Children's Mental Health Outreach
262-548-7666

Medical Emergency: 911
Family Emergency: 211

Foster Parent Mentor
Nikki Mertens
(12 and under)
262-246-6180

Lisa Roberts, Supervisor
262-548-7271

Shari Rather, Foster Care Coordinator
262-548-7267

January 2009 Placements

Regular Foster Care:
50 Children
1 Admitted
0 Discharged

Treatment Foster Care:
22 Children
0 Admitted
0 Discharged

Group Homes:
3 Children
0 Admitted
3 Discharged

Residential Care Facilities:
9 Children
0 Admitted
0 Discharged

Relative Placements:
33 Children
4 Admitted
0 Discharged

Social Workers:

Suzanne Arnold
262-548-7348

Peggy Beisser
262-548-7261

Angie Briggs
262-548-7275

Jeannine Eng
262-548-7268

Margaret Johnson
262-548-7265

Elizabeth Russo
262-548-7349

Kim Sampson
262-548-7273

Linda Senger
262-548-7698

Ted Wuerslin
262-548-7269

Jennifer Wycle
262-548-7260

We Need You!

For more information about becoming a foster parent in Waukesha County, please contact Shari Rather at:

srather@waukeshacounty.gov

262-548-7267

Or visit our website at www.waukeshacounty.gov
And follow the links to foster care.

