

Working Together with Primary Families

FosterParentCollege.com® A Viewer Guide

Introduction to the Course

This class will explore the benefits and challenges of building relationships between foster and primary families and will provide strategies to help foster parents navigate these relationships successfully. Research shows that when foster families work closely with primary families in a safe and respectful way, it reduces the child's confusion and anxiety and increases the chance of reunification.

Wendy Wolff, MS, school counselor, researcher, consultant, and expert in positive visit practices, shares her years of experience not only as a professional, but as a foster and adoptive parent.



Wendy Wolff, MS

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Define "primary family"
2. Describe the importance of the foster family's relationship with the primary family
3. Describe the benefits and challenges of shared parenting
4. State the role of the child protection team
5. Identify typical issues that bring primary families to the court system
6. Give examples of grief and ambiguous loss
7. Understand the role of empathy in foster care

This companion guide provides the content of the course.

In the opening vignette, a foster parent interviews a primary parent about what she would like all foster parents to know about primary parents. The primary parent encourages foster parents to reach out and make a connection with primary parents and not view them as "monsters."

Shared Parenting

“Primary” refers to the child’s birth or legal family and may include birth or stepparents, siblings, grandparents, and others who have a strong attachment to the child. “Shared parenting” implies both the primary family and the foster family working together to promote reunification of the child with the primary family.

All parties benefit from shared parenting:

Child:

- reduced sense of abandonment
- strengthened sense of identity and self-worth
- increased sense of security; less stress
- clear role and responsibility
- less confusion, resulting in fewer challenging behaviors
- more consistency and structure

Primary family:

- reduced tension between caregivers
- strengthened sense of identity and self-worth
- clear role and responsibility
- increased trust and confidence

Foster family:

- reduced child behavior problems
- reduced tension between caregivers
- clear role and responsibility

The Child Protection Team

The role of the child protection team is to ensure the safety of the child while the primary parents work on parenting issues. The development of a safety plan is key to making sure the child and parent maintain their relationship safely. The team determines the frequency, level of supervision, and location of the visits or contacts.

The plan is based on several factors specific to each family:

- the child's needs, age, and development
- the nature of the child/family attachment and relationship
- the degree family members can engage collaboratively with the team
- safety and risk factors presented by family members

Foster parents are part of the child protection team and may or may not be expected to participate in the visits. They should, however, ask for and share relevant information with the team concerning any safety related concerns, especially if they will be accompanying the child on visits.

About Primary Parents

Families that end up in the court system frequently have experienced their own challenges as children and as adults. Challenges that shape the primary family's parenting approach include:

- **Childhood trauma**
Many parents have their own stories of childhood abuse and neglect and did not have nurturing or healthy parenting skills modeled by their own parents. Perhaps their caregivers struggled with mental health or substance abuse issues or domestic violence, homelessness, or instability that caused high levels of stress in their families of origin.
- **Inadequate coping skills**
Life can be stressful, and many parents involved in the child welfare system did not have healthy coping skills modeled by their families or other adults in their lives. When basic needs are met, individuals can focus their energy on higher level thinking, planning, and emotion regulation. When people live in a heightened state of chronic stress, they often function in a fight or flight mode, which can lead to frantic attempts to meet their immediate needs. Although most parents do not wish to harm their children, the inability to deal with stress in their lives can sometimes lead to extreme anger and confusion that in turn leads to abuse and neglect.
- **Adult lifestyle choices**
The parents' current lifestyle may include addiction to drugs and/or alcohol, domestic violence, untreated mental health issues, cognitive disabilities, chronic poverty, instability, and/or criminal activity. These problems interfere with their ability to parent their children consistently and safely.

- **Isolation**

Parents often lack healthy support systems, or the ability to seek out help when it is needed. This may be due to shame and embarrassment or just limited financial, emotional, or educational resources. Many parents may have had negative experiences themselves with child protection and may be distrustful of “helping professionals,” including the courts, child welfare workers, therapists, attorneys, and foster parents.

Foster parents will need empathy as they deal with primary families. Foster parents will need to try to understand mentally and emotionally what the primary family members may be feeling as well as the reasons behind their behavior. Empathy has two parts:

1. Understanding the primary family members’ reasons for doing things.
2. Trying to relate to how the family members are feeling.

Looking at the whole family, including environment and history, will help foster parents develop an understanding about why the primary family functions as it does. Empathy does not mean accepting all behaviors or agreeing with what the primary parents have done. It does mean that the foster parents will have a clearer picture of how to help the primary family build on its strengths. Avoiding negative stereotypes and making assumptions about the primary family is a critical prerequisite to building a relationship with the family and connecting with the foster child.

Tricia continues her story explaining that no matter what mistakes the primary parents or family have made, most children will have a strong sense of loyalty to their family. If a foster parent talks negatively about the family, the child will have a more difficult time healing and forgiving their parents.

Grief and Ambiguous Loss

Primary families and children in care experience feelings of grief and loss while they are living apart. The grief they experience is called “ambiguous loss” and is recognized as special since it is associated with a loss involving uncertainty.

There are two types of ambiguous loss children in care may experience:

1. The parent is physically present but is unable to meet the child’s needs.
Example: A child is living at home with the parent, but the parent has a mental illness or addiction which makes her emotionally unavailable to the child.
2. The parent is psychologically present but physically absent.
Example: A child is in foster care and does not live with the parent, yet the parent is emotionally present in the child’s mind.

Children’s grief reactions to this sense of loss include, but are not limited to: sadness; depression; anger; and difficulty sleeping, eating, or concentrating. They may seem anxious or withdrawn.

In order to help a child through the grieving process, foster parents need to consider the child’s age, emotional development, attachment to the primary family, and reasons for placement in care.

Terrell's Story

Terrell's story helps viewers understand the concept of grief and ambiguous loss. Terrell was placed in care at the age of 12 because his mother was involved in drugs and domestic violence. Terrell's anger and refusal to follow foster home rules resulted in multiple foster home placements and finally a placement in a group home. Terrell explained that his anger was a way to push people away. When he was 15, he was placed with a foster family to recover from knee surgery. This foster family was different: when they went to the hospital to meet Terrell, they wanted to know about him, not dispense rules about how they expected him to behave. The foster parents were accepting and non-judgmental of Terrell, his mother, and his family. Terrell stayed with and was supported by the foster family through difficult times, including the death of his mother.

Understanding Empathy in Foster Care

Empathy, the ability to understand another person's feelings, and nonjudgmental attitudes can help foster parents support primary families by not imposing their own moral codes and expectations on the family. Foster parents should not minimize any issues of abuse or neglect the child may have experienced, and they should support children who express their feelings about their histories without becoming engaged in the child's anger.

An interactive exercise asks viewers to select empathetic responses to a primary family's perspective.

1. A foster parent is dropping his child off for a Saturday morning visit, and the primary parent begins complaining about her case plan:

"I can't believe how totally out of control this has gotten. This is ridiculous! Half of what my kids are saying about what I did to them isn't even true, but the judge doesn't believe me. So what if I might have messed with drugs at one time? If the kids would just listen to me, none of this would have happened. You know how difficult they can be! I know parents who do way worse than anything I have, and their children didn't get taken away! I just need someone to give me a break!"

Foster parent empathetic response:

"I'm sure this is all really confusing and frustrating, especially if you think people aren't listening to your side of the story. I know you love your kids and are going to keep working hard to get them back."

Explanation:

This is an empathic response. Foster parents might find it difficult to feel a sense of empathy toward a parent who has put the safety of a child at risk, especially when the primary family member minimizes or denies the harm done to the child. Research has shown that when parents have substance abuse issues, the same pleasure-reward mechanism in the brain

that motivates them to focus on their children becomes literally “hijacked” by the addiction. This may explain why parents sometimes put their drugs, rather than their children, first.

2. You receive a parent call late at night:

“I can’t do it!! I may as well just give up. The judge is expecting too much! I have so many appointments; parenting class on Monday, treatment on Tuesday and Thursday, and then visits on Friday. They told me Brian had to move out if I want to get the kids back. Without him, I can’t even pay the rent and don’t have time to look for a job! I know you’re getting some money to take care of my kids, could you help me with my rent? You are the only person I can count on!”

Foster parent empathetic response:

“Sounds like you depended on Brian for some financial support, and now you are responsible for handling your bills on your own. I care about you and your kids, but our budget is tight, too. I’m wondering if you’ve talked with your social worker and explained your dilemma?”

Explanation:

This statement is empathic. It acknowledges what the parent has said and the challenges she is facing but redirects her to a more appropriate resource. Balancing empathy without enabling a person’s negative behavior patterns or trying to fix the problem can be challenging. Primary parents may view the foster parent as a parental figure for themselves as well as their children. Learning to listen and set clear boundaries around your role and relationship is tricky, but it will help the parents and the children in the long run, if they’re empowered to solve their own problems.

3. A primary family member shows up to a visitation visibly angry or agitated and begins criticizing the child’s care.

“What is that scratch on Devon’s face? I’m calling my social worker right now, and I want him out of your house. You think you’re better than me, but his face wasn’t all scratched up when he lived in my house. Maybe they should do an investigation on you. Devon told me you lock him in his room and don’t let him eat dinner. That’s not right, and I’ve had enough!”

Foster parent empathetic response:

“I can hear you are really frustrated right now. I’m taking Devon back to my house and will call the social worker to let her know your concerns. I hope we can work this out so Devon doesn’t have to move homes again.”

Explanation:

This is an empathic statement. The foster parent acknowledges the anger and sets a clear boundary that she will not be disrespected. Fear is frequently displayed as anger. Primary parents often feel they have no control or power over their situation, which can cause panic and fear. Blaming everyone else and avoiding their own responsibilities are common responses when people lack a sense of control. Foster parents can be natural targets, as primary parents may feel jealous or threatened by their relationship with and care of their child.

Interactions between foster and primary parents can be complicated. When primary parents see their child developing a relationship with foster parents, feelings of jealousy, fear, competition, and criticism may surface. Practicing empathy and compassion will help alleviate potential conflicts and will promote the potential for more positive communication.

Compassion, like empathy, seeks to understand another person’s feelings, but compassion also includes a desire to help alleviate the person’s suffering.

Building a Shared Parenting Relationship

Developing a shared parenting relationship helps close the gap between the foster family and the primary family. Progress will be slow until both sides are comfortable with and can trust each other. As the relationship deepens, the types and frequency of contacts intensify. More shared parenting and increased respect between families benefits everyone involved, especially the child who translates increased communication and sharing into security in the midst of uncertainty.

Examples of the levels and types of contact between foster and primary families:

Minimum level	Medium level	High level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recognize child’s family ▪ Display photos ▪ Learn family tree ▪ Celebrate birthdays ▪ Identify traditions ▪ Talk positively ▪ Meet at agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make phone calls ▪ Invite to appointments ▪ Exchange visits ▪ Assist with visitations ▪ Acknowledge situation ▪ Give encouragement ▪ Share school reports ▪ Support sibling contact ▪ Update on progress ▪ Give compliments ▪ Ask questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mentor ▪ Give feedback ▪ Model skills ▪ Recommend community resources ▪ Provide respite care

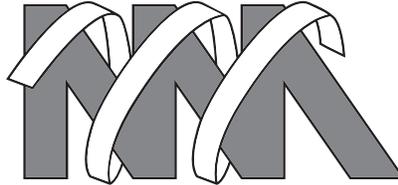
In closing

It is helpful to view the relationship between primary and foster families as a work in progress. It takes time and patience to eliminate stereotypes, build trust, and develop relationships. The working relationship may feel awkward at first, especially when the families come from very different backgrounds and histories, but it benefits everyone, especially the child in care. Whether the goal is reunification or foster-to-adoption, patience and effort will help provide a more stable environment for the child in the long term.

Viewers are reminded to access the printable material in the handout section of this course.

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