

Reducing Family Stress

FosterParentCollege.com® A Viewer Guide

The Foster Child and Stress

This class will help viewers explore how bringing a foster child into their family can affect day-to-day life. All families naturally experience stress. The addition of a foster child is a big life-style change and brings with it stressful challenges. This course looks at a typical family and how the challenges of fostering can add to naturally occurring stress.

Richard Delaney, PhD, psychologist, author, and foster care consultant; and Betsy Keefer Smalley, LSW, Director of Foster Care and Adoption Training, Institute for Human Services (IHS), Columbus, Ohio, both share their years of experience in the field of foster care.

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

1. Identify sources of stress in the foster family.
2. Describe the impact fostering a traumatized child can have on family members.
3. Describe the physical and emotional impact of stress and trauma.
4. Describe how stress can be minimized during all phases of placement.
5. Describe how a support system can help reduce stress for the foster family and help preserve a nurturing family environment.



*Richard Delaney,
PhD*



*Betsy
Keefer Smalley, LSW*

General Stress in Life

Worries, or stressors, are present in every home. They are usually centered on meeting expectations or periods of change. Increased levels of stress can threaten feelings of security and stability.

Most foster children have lived stressful lives full of abuse, neglect, or dangerous environments. When foster children enter a new home, their stress does not simply go away. It is often revealed as difficult behaviors. The stress of a new foster child with challenging behavior added to life's general stress can create a serious issue for the foster family.

Stress and Trauma

The stress of being placed in care combined with prior trauma can impact a child's behavior. Stress and trauma can cause:

- lowered confidence and self-esteem
- inability to understand and follow rules
- inability to verbally express feelings
- lack of trust in others
- hyper-alertness to danger
- seeing danger or negative intention where it does not exist

Recognizing Stress

In the first case study family, Cathy and Armando are foster parents of Denni, now a college student. They and their biological son, Jason, discuss Denni's rocky beginning when she joined the family as a young teenager and how her temper outbursts dramatically increased the family's stress. The family recognizes the shifts in the family dynamics and the high level of anxiety caused by fostering.

Additional Sources of Stress

In addition to naturally occurring family stress and the stress the child brings into the home, working with the foster system does not always make life easier.

Stressors in Foster Care

Additional stress can come from:

- the introduction of the agency and the caseworker into family life
 - exposing the family to scrutiny can be overwhelming
 - working with a caseworker may be frustrating
- interactions with professionals
 - not all suggestions and interactions are helpful
 - parents might feel they are "blamed" for the child's behavior
- additional contact with school systems and agencies
 - additional meetings and demands can be intimidating
 - foster parents and siblings might be embarrassed by the foster child's behavior

- unfavorable responses from family and neighbors
 - foster parents might feel judged or misunderstood
 - foster parents and siblings might be embarrassed by the foster child's behavior
- visitation, reunification, and birth family issues
 - direct contact with the birth family can produce anxiety
 - lack of control over the case plan may be frustrating
- transcultural and interracial placements
 - foster parents may be ill-at-ease with or unaware of racial or cultural differences

The Impact of Stress

While stress is naturally occurring, too much stress can cause changes in:

- emotions – *irritation, frustration, loss of humor, and a sense of helplessness*
- behavior – *decreased contact with family or friends, poor work relations, and sense of loneliness*
- thinking – *mental slowness, confusion, and general negative attitude or thoughts*
- health – *weakened immune system, heart disease, and higher blood pressure*

Although foster care can be stressful, it can also be highly rewarding to both the foster family and the foster child. When Denni joined Cathy's and Armando's family, Cathy was worried about being a good foster mom, but she learned to relax and got through the stress. Once Cathy reduced her stress, Denni, too, learned to relax and after four turbulent years, the family slowly became a safe and supportive environment. Even though the process was painful at times, the family grew stronger. Denni has a loving family; Cathy and Armando have a loving daughter.

Willingness to Consider Fostering

In this interactive exercise, viewers are asked to think about how they might experience foster parenting. The exercise contains a series of statements about handling children who have issues and/or problems. Viewers are asked to choose "strongly disagree," "undecided/neutral," or "strongly agree," to indicate their personal comfort levels with each issue.

- I would be willing to consider fostering a child who lies to me.
- I would be able to cope with a child who constantly rejects me or my family.
- I would be open to fostering a child with a lesbian or gay sexual orientation.
- I would be willing to foster a child who loses his temper a lot.

- I would be willing to foster a child who is verbally or physically aggressive.
- I could cope with a child who is disobedient, disrespectful, or defiant.
- I could cope with a child who shows sexual behavior problems.
- I would consider fostering a child who manipulates, lies, and/or steals.
- I would consider fostering a child who has many emotional and behavioral problems.
- I would be willing to work with the birth parents of my foster child.
- I would be able to cope with providing foster care, even if a caseworker didn't like me or get back to me by phone in a reasonable period of time.

Individuals who “strongly disagree” or are “undecided/neutral” may benefit from specific training; more information might help dispel fears and increase comfort level.

Expectations

In the following exercise, viewers are asked to examine their own expectations about fostering. Dr. Delaney reads statements about expectations, and viewers agree or disagree. Statements are followed by the correct selection and an explanation.

The best way to think about discipline is that rewarding children for good behavior is better than punishing them for bad behavior.

Agree. I would agree it is better to reward for good behavior. Many children who enter foster care have had too much exposure to punishment, coercive approaches, and maltreatment. Rewards put the emphasis on building upon their small successes, and rewards keep things positive.

In my opinion, the primary job of parents is to help their children feel safe, secure, and loved.

Agree. I absolutely agree the primary job of parents is to help their children feel safe, secure, and loved. Foster children may have never felt any or all of those feelings in the past.

When it comes to relating to your children, I feel it is the foster parent's job to take care of the child's needs, not the other way around.

Agree. I agree with this, too. Some children have never had their needs met in a regular, satisfactory way. Others have actually had to take care of their own parents.

In raising children, I feel that children should begin to learn to speak their minds, their feelings, and their needs when they are small.

Agree. This is true, that is, I agree with it! It's important for children to gain confidence in the fact that their thoughts and feelings are important, too. It's important that children come to think that you believe their thoughts are important.

When I think about raising foster children, I believe they may need lots of help and support to get over their past and get on with their lives.

Agree. I agree; this is good insight. Foster children can benefit from someone who tries to understand them, their thoughts, feelings, and intentions.

Since many children who enter care come from abusive and violent backgrounds, it is important that agencies help potential foster parents examine their expectations of fostering. Expectations are good for personal goal setting, but may be problematic when foster parents have unrealistic expectations for their foster children, raising stress levels for everyone.

A Support System for Stress Management

A comprehensive support system can help families prevent and manage stress. Four supports, or “stress busters,” need to be in place at all times:

1. Training and Skill-building

Attending classes and workshops, taking online training, and reading about foster care will increase your knowledge and skills.

2. Family Relationships and Communication

A strong family or relationship helps ensure a successful fostering experience. Devoting special time to children already in the family is important so they don’t feel forgotten or invisible as time is devoted to the foster child.

3. Friends and Other Foster Parents

Connecting with other foster parents will provide support and ideas, but time spent with non-fostering friends will provide a mini-break from the stress of fostering.

4. Teamwork

Caring for a foster child is a team effort. Trying to be a super-parent and doing it alone needlessly raises stress levels. Rely on the child’s team for support.

Pre-placement

In the second case study family, recent empty-nesters, DeAnthony and Tricia, have decided to open their home to 7-year-old Erica, who has been in care for two years and suffers from depression. Placement of Erica was sudden, with only two day’s notice, and Tricia’s stress level began to rise. This type of pre-placement stress is normal.

In this exercise, viewers are asked to identify which “stress busters” DeAnthony and Tricia could use during the pre-placement stage. Viewers sort the statements into training and skill building; family relationships and communication; friends and foster parents; and teamwork. Statements are followed with the correct response and an explanation.

Read about depression

Training. The family could read books written by professionals about what to look for in children like Erica who have depression. They also could review their pre-placement training material.

Involve your grown children

Family. DeAnthony and Tricia need to meet with their grown kids and explain why they decided to become foster parents and listen carefully to the children's thoughts and ideas.

Join with other foster parents

Friends. This is a great time to use the foster community support groups. It is also an important time to find a respite family who will help when under stress.

Inform close friends and family members

Family. The family needs to talk and listen to their close friends, their parents, and in-laws about the new extended family.

Ask professionals questions

Teamwork. DeAnthony and Tricia need to use the services provided by the agency. They need to ask the worker for more information on the "mild behavior problems" she mentioned. Also, request a pre-placement visit, an opportunity for Erica to visit the home for a brief visit before her actual placement.

Meet with the school

Teamwork. This is the time to contact the local school the child will attend and inquire about the schedule, the registration process, and the classroom Erica will be joining.

Placement

DeAnthony and Tricia asked Erica's social worker for more information about Erica's "mild behavior problems" and learned about her lying, stealing, and depression. The social worker was unable to share Erica's records but did share her life book. A pre-placement visit was arranged, and everyone felt more relaxed about the upcoming placement. By trying to more fully understand Erica and her issues, DeAnthony and Tricia have taken great strides toward relieving their stress level.

Early in Placement

After a smooth transition into Anthony's and Tricia's home, they enjoyed a very brief "honeymoon" period when Erica was pleasant and cooperative. Soon, Erica was losing her temper, crying, and keeping her parents up at night. The honeymoon was over.

The "stress busters" exercise continues. Viewers are asked to identify which "stress busters" DeAnthony and Tricia could use during the early placement stage to maintain a balanced support system. Viewers sort the statements into training and skill building, family relationships and communication, friends and foster parents, and teamwork. Statements are followed with the correct response and an explanation.

Be an active member of the child's team.

Teamwork: *By being involved as team members, DeAnthony and Tricia can both be a help to, and be helped by, the professionals assigned to Erica's case. Being an active team member includes staying in touch with their caseworker, talking to the therapist Erica sees for her depression, and meeting with the other team members.*

Use respite care

Friends: *Tricia and DeAnthony need to keep their life well-rounded. To reduce stress is to have a full life, not one just centered on foster care. They need to maintain contact with their friends and other family members and continue enjoying their hobbies.*

Communicate with each other

Family: *Good communication between Tricia and DeAnthony will help reduce stress. They need to constantly role-check to make sure one of them is not carrying too much of the load. In addition, they need to use active listening skills to hear each other's concerns and comments. They also need to begin family meetings that include Erica.*

Continue training

Training: *Training is key for both Tricia and DeAnthony. Even though they have previously raised children successfully, the fostering family encounters different problems. To reduce stress, a balanced approach includes continuous training.*

Keep records

Teamwork: *Tricia and DeAnthony need to keep a running log of events that have happened during the day, from doctor visits to schoolwork, and especially Erica's emotional times. In addition, all records should be stored in a secure, safe location.*

Post-placement

Even after placement, foster parents will experience stress whether they continue to foster their child or decide to adopt. Viewers are asked to select an ending to Tricia's and DeAnthony's story by selecting fostering or adoption and completing an interactive exercise.

If fostering is chosen:

Erica was freed for adoption by the courts. Even though Tricia and DeAnthony had grown quite fond of Erica, and Erica had come to trust her foster parents, they chose not to adopt. While the decision was difficult, they felt they needed a break from children and wanted to enjoy the "empty nest" feeling again. Separating from Erica was stressful, but knowing the adoptive parents wanted them to stay part of Erica's life helped ease the pain.

Stress caused by the separation and loss when a child leaves the foster home can be tempered by relying on a balanced support team:

Talk with the child before he or she leaves

Family: The family needs to have open talks with Erica to help her understand her feelings about leaving. The family could have a “moving on” party for Erica.

Continue getting support

Friends: Although it might be difficult for the family to continue in a fostering support group, it is a great place to get support.

Keep active

Friends: It would be good if the family took a break between Erica and a new placement. The time could be spent doing things with their older children and friends.

Understand the grieving process

Training: It is important for parents and their birth children to feel and express grief and loss. Tricia and DeAnthony could take an online class to understand their grief and loss.

Talk with the agency worker

Teamwork: The family could discuss open adoption with Erica’s caseworker to determine if the adoptive parents would consider allowing Tricia and DeAnthony to be part of Erica’s family.

If adoption is chosen:

Three months after Erica’s adoption was finalized, Erica seems happy at times, but still tests her adoptive parents. Tricia says most of her stress comes from her arguments with her husband. DeAnthony agrees that the arguments are stressful and feels Tricia is handling Erica with kid gloves. This conflicts with his feeling that Erica is now their daughter and should be raised like their other daughters.

Stress caused by adoption can be tempered by relying on a balanced support team:

Discuss the decision to adopt with other family members before moving ahead

Family: Tricia and DeAnthony need to include their grown children, parents, and close friends in the decision making process.

Meet with other adoptive parents

Friends: This would be an ideal time for Tricia and DeAnthony to enroll in an adoptive parent support group.

Continue with professional help

Teamwork: The family needs to understand they will need additional help and support from a mental health counselor for Erica and possibly for themselves.

Continue with learning

Training: *All family members will need additional training to fully understand the effects of adoption on the child's development, identity formation, and emancipation. Information about resources available to adoptive parents will be helpful to Tricia and DeAnthony.*

Discuss adoption with the child being adopted

Family: *Tricia and DeAnthony will need to talk with Erica about the adoption and her feelings toward her birth family.*

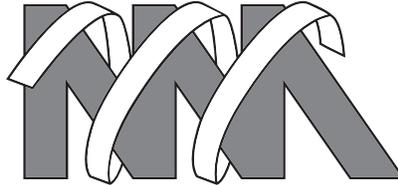
In Closing

Whether a family decides to foster or adopt, family members' stress levels will rise. Parents who use available resources and work to reduce stress will be able to provide a safe and secure environment for the foster or adoptive child. When parents reduce stress in the family before it becomes overwhelming, the child will adapt more smoothly to his or her new living situation.

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

Published by:

Northwest Media, Inc.



**Specializing in media-based
materials for social learning.**

For a product catalog or for further
information, please contact us.

Phone: 541-343-6636

Toll-Free: 800-777-6636

Fax: 541-343-0177

E-mail: nwm@northwestmedia.com

Visit us on the Web at:

<http://www.northwestmedia.com>

Mailing Address:

Northwest Media Inc.

326 W. 12th Avenue

Eugene, OR 97401

© 2013, Northwest Media, Inc. All rights reserved.

This guide may be copied and used as a handout
for discussion with foster and adoptive parents,
birth parents, caseworkers, or others.