



NYS Citizens' Coalition for Children

## **IT'S ALL IN THE PREPARATION** **Advice for Preparing F/A Parents for Allegations**

**By Pat O'Brien, President, NYSCCC**

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Probably the single greatest traumatic incident for the good people who come forward to be foster parents or adoptive parents is to be accused of some form of child abuse. People who come forward to care for children usually view themselves as people who love children and only want to help and be of service to them. These very same people often find themselves in the awful circumstance of being accused of hurting the very children they came forward to help. The trauma of being accused of hurting a child, however, is tenfold more than it need be had the prospective parent only been prepared for this inevitable happening.

I had recently had the good fortune of directing a foster care program for three years with over 1,200 children in its foster boarding home program. Because it is my nature to get to know the people that I work with, despite the fact that I had been the Director of this program I also assigned myself to be the lead trainer as well. Hence, I was always in control of what information prospective foster parents received as well as foster parents who have been with the agency for a while. These more seasoned foster parents had to receive advanced training to renew their foster care licenses. One of the most interesting things I learned being a trainer to the seasoned foster parent is that over half of them had at least one allegation of child abuse made against them. And I always found it interesting that no one had ever spoke to seasoned foster parents before they became foster parents about this highly likely occurrence until I incorporated it into the initial foster parent training of this agency. Almost universally all the foster parents agreed that had someone spoke to them about the possibility of having accusations made against them before they became foster parents they would have been able to deal with the accusation a lot better.

Hence, I would like to share here some ideas to incorporate into any initial foster parent-training curriculum that can go a long way to alleviating some of the stress around being accused of hurting the very children people came forward to help.

### **PARENT PANELS DURING THE PRE-PLACEMENT TRAINING**

There is no better training than bringing in seasoned foster parents to help prepare prospective parents in what to expect. Whenever I take over the training of any agency that I work for I make sure I bring in panels of seasoned foster parents to speak on the trials and tribulations of what it is like to be a foster parent. The panels that I put together cover many topics, one of which is how to handle allegations. When I put the panel together I simply asked the question "how did

you handle your first allegation made against you?” And matter-of-factly the panelists describe their experiences. The power of the parent panel is that the prospective parent immediately understands that allegations are simply a part of the job of being a foster parent. When Panelists describe their experience it always leaves the prospective parent with the understanding that this experience is not the end of the world. Some of the panelists that I have used with the toughest kids and the toughest birth families speak very well about the procedures and give great advice to prospective parents about how to handle the situation. By and large, here is some of the advice new parents received from prospective parents over the years that I did the training:

- Stay Calm when the State investigative worker comes unannounced knocking at your door.
- See if you can try to reach your worker, supervisor, or director during the time the unannounced worker gets there or, when that is not possible, to call them immediately after the person leaves.
- Make sure you get that worker’s name and telephone number before that worker leaves your home and preferably even before you start talking to the person.
- Tell the truth in a calm fashion and don’t be defensive, hostile, or disrespectful to the worker, child, or child’s parent.

## **WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO ME?**

One of the most difficult things for new and seasoned foster parents with no pre-placement preparation for this likely happening is to understand is “why.” People cannot understand why anyone would make an accusation against them. So it is also very important to go over the “why’s?” in pre-placement preparation.

**You Must Be An “Upstanding Member Of Your Community”:** Firstly, I always share with seasoned as well as prospective foster parents that they must be upstanding members of their community. I share with them that if there is anyone in their neighborhood who does not like them, and that person finds out they are a foster parent, it is almost an automatic false allegation. People who dislike you in the community know that all they have to do is call the local child abuse 800 number, and say you are a foster parent who hits your child, and they know that they can get someone out to your home in 24 hours. So, it is very important to get along with all your neighbors and family members if you become a foster parent. And at the very least, if you do not get along with your neighbors and family members to be aware that someone is very likely going to report you for abuse once they get wind you are a foster parent.

**There are Logical Reasons To Be Accused By Child & Birthparent:** Secondly, there are very logical reasons for both the child and the child’s biological parent to accuse foster parents of abuse, particularly shortly after the new child arrives into his or her new home. The absolute worst time to get involved in any child’s life is immediately after that child was just removed from her biological parent’s home. And what is a foster parent’s primary service to children?

Yes, to get involved in a child's life immediately following the removal of that child from his biological home.

Aside from the powerful life story of Dave Pelzer who wrote about his experiences in A Child Called It and The Lost Boy, most children removed from their biological homes do not appreciate being removed. A majority of them are removed due to drug related neglect. The child may not have been verbally or physically abused the way Mr. Pelzer was, but they were nonetheless being cared for in a neglectful way due in large part to their parent's drug problem.

These are the children who might have been left home alone with no adult supervision or who might have stopped going to school. Or these are the children who might have gone to school hungry, tired, inappropriately dressed, dirty, or in some way indicating to the professionals at the school that they are not being care for properly. The State sends someone unannounced to the home and realizes they must remove the child because to leave the child in that neglectful environment would be irresponsible. However, the child is not aware they are not being taken care of properly. It's the only life they know, and they learned how to cope, and they learned how to survive. They love their parent(s) and want to go home. To them home is not such a bad place. Is there little wonder that these children might think that the quickest way home is to accuse the foster parent of something he or she did not do? Of course not, it's a very logical thing for the child to do. The real problem is when we do not prepare the foster parent for this.

On the other hand, when a child is taken away from a biological parent, particularly one who is addicted to drugs, there is no greater person in denial than that parent on that day. That parent's first reaction is not to get their life together and get treatment for the drug problem. They are denying at this stage they even have a drug problem. No, the parent's first reaction is to do whatever it takes to get their child back immediately. Is it any wonder that these parents-in-denial's first target is going to be with the person their child is living with? Hence, false allegations abound from this front as well. The State still has to go out to the foster parent's home to investigate these allegations. And this becomes a big problem when the foster parent has not already been prepared for this inevitability.

**Accusations by Professionals That May Even Be True:** When one becomes a foster parent one has just signed up for the job of super parent, particularly when it relates to the professionals in your child's life. Having worked as a school social worker for many years, I can speak with authority that there is a double standard when it comes to foster parents.

For instance, when someone's biological child comes to school and simply shares with a teacher that "mommy spanked me last night" there is generally no official reaction assuming there are no marks or bruises. The teacher might give an extra hug to the child that day and might even possibly have an informal discussion with the parent to see how things are going at home. However, a foster child could simply be stating a matter-of-fact fact that "mommy spanked me last night", but this very same teacher has knowledge that the child is in foster care. Now it can become a major crisis for the foster parent because the teacher feels an obligation to contact CPS. This is why during our discussion of alternative forms of discipline and behavior management of children in our pre-preparation training that we are clear that though there are many good reasons to not utilize corporal punishment, perhaps the best reason is that if a

professional finds out they might be reported to CPS for doing exactly what they did to their own biological children. It is this author's opinion that while learning about corporal punishment of a foster child must be addressed with the foster parent, the professionals who work with the child should contact the worker at the agency rather than CPS directly. A spanking, or other form of non-excessive corporal punishment, by a foster parent requires intervention and retraining. But it does not automatically require a full CPS investigation. But foster parents must be prepared about this possibility nonetheless.

### **TELL THE FOSTER PARENT THE TRUTH AS YOU KNOW IT**

The final utmost important thing to share with prospective foster parents, and seasoned foster parent who may not have had the training, is what the procedures are when allegations are made. I, for instance, have the good fortune to be able to share with the foster parents that I trained, that over 90% of all allegations where I do my work come back "unfounded." So find out the percentages in your locality of "findings" made on foster parents in your area. I am also able to share with prospective foster parents that the investigators who come to their home and make unannounced visits are usually very professional and that this is the only job they have --- to investigate possible abuse in foster homes. I share with them, again, that these investigators, more or less, know what they are doing and they come back 9 out of every 10 times with an "unfounded" conclusion. Professionals who advise foster parents should learn the facts about their county rather than completely relying the anecdotal horror stories of the individual falsely accused foster parents that they know. Any system is going to have cases where the system has screwed up. Find out the facts before you present the exception as the rule.

I also share with my foster parents that the times that I have seen investigators come back with a "finding" on a case that I believe was an "unfounded" was when the understandably upset foster parent acted in a defensive, hostile, and non-cooperative way. And I have seen these false "findings" when the foster parent chose to be particularly hostile in talking about the child or the child's birthparent. The investigator was almost put in a spot where even if they believed the foster parent didn't do what they were accused of, they would not want the foster parent to continue to parent with such hostility and he or she chose to "find" the case anyway.

### **THE AGENCY'S ROLE IS ESSENTIAL**

Foster parents have reported to me that the thing most essential to their retention after an allegation has been made was the support they received from their agency. Agencies often make their parents feel like convicted felons after a simple allegation is made. However, agency staff can remain supportive to the foster parent and neutral about the investigation at the same time. There is a reason why they don't let us do the investigation ourselves and we should take advantage of the fact that we are not allowed to do the official investigation. It allows us to be neutral and be there to listen to the accused foster parent. It allows us to be there and hold the upset or crying foster parent's hand. Our neutrality can make all the difference in the world as far as retention of that parent is concerned when the ordeal is over and the "unfounded" finding comes back.