



NEW YORK STATE CITIZENS' COALITION FOR CHILDREN, INC.

*Foster Parents Speak:  
Crossing Bridges and Fostering Change*

**DISCUSSION & RESOURCE GUIDE**

**Introduction**

In the post-ASFA world, family foster care is viewed as a temporary extension of the child's family, not as a replacement for it. In this new approach foster and birth families work as teammates with caseworkers in caring for children. Foster parents are, and will be, challenged to create shared parenting relationships with birth families and agencies that protect children in a community of care as they move through the system. Creating those relationships requires an effort on everyone's part. There must be planning, good communication and cooperation among all parties for shared parenting to work.

The video, "Foster Parents Speak: Crossing Bridges and Fostering Change" presents ten foster parents speaking candidly about the challenges in developing and nurturing shared parenting relationships with birth families and professionals to benefit the children in their care. They share real life techniques and strategies for improving communication and cooperation to create partnerships that support children in the foster care system.

**Discussion Starter Questions**

Before viewing the video, talk about your perceptions of foster parenting in general and foster parent roles as members of the permanency planning team, mentors, and co-parents with birth families. After viewing the film talk about whether or not any of your perceptions about foster parenting and relationships between foster and birth families have changed.

- What new things did you learn from the video? How do you think this new insight might change you?
- Did anything in the video surprise you? If so, what? Why was it surprising?
- Which things in the video were most like your own experience?
- Which things in the video were most different from your own experience?
- If you could ask the foster parents in the video a question, what would you ask them?

## Chapter One: It Takes More Than Love

*“You must be ready for this job, that is the first thing. It is a great challenge.”*

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion**

- Fostering brings a lot of stress into a home. It’s important to consider every member of the family when thinking about fostering. Everyone in the house will be living and/or interacting with the foster child, his or her behaviors, and the birth family. Discuss how the decision to foster will impact birth children and members of the extended foster family, such as grandparents.
- In the post-ASFA world, foster parents are being challenged to assume new roles, work differently, and think differently about relationships. Foster parenting is increasingly defined as working with families, rather than rescuing or protecting children. Discuss why all foster families are expected to and are required to assume these new roles.
- Foster parenting requires working in partnership with a team of professionals to help the child return home or find another permanent placement. This goal requires excellent communication skills and a commitment to contribute to and follow the plan approved by the courts. Foster parents are peers with others on the permanency team, sharing common goals although with different tasks. Discuss the definition of the word, “professional,” and the difficulties foster parents experience in both assuming and gaining acceptance of their role as peer professionals.
- Once fostering is underway, parents may feel a loss of autonomy, as they are required to follow regulations and procedures that do not apply to their biological/adopted children, such as, making special arrangements in order to take a family vacation or hire a babysitter. Discuss state, county, and/or agency requirements of foster parents. Discuss how different standards may impact the family and the changes that foster parents may have to make to comply with governing regulations.

### **Resources to Explore**

- NYS Office of Children and Family Services Foster Parent Manual (pdf)
- A Foster Care Reading List, NYSCCC Factsheet
- Taking Your Place at The Table – Michael Neff, Esq.
- Communicating with Professionals - NYSCCC Factsheet
- Becoming a Foster Parent – A collection of internet links and articles from NYSCCC, [www.nysccc.org](http://www.nysccc.org)
- Self Assessment Readiness Guide – Hillside Family of Agencies, Inc., Rochester, [www.hillside.com/PDF/fosterparent\\_pamphlet.pdf](http://www.hillside.com/PDF/fosterparent_pamphlet.pdf)
- Fostering By State - Links to the State agencies that train, license, and oversee foster parents, Link to About.com, <http://adoption.about.com/od/bystate>

## Chapter Two: Keeping Kids Connected

*“The relationship of the child and the birth family is important.  
An effort should be made to keep that connection.”*

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion**

- When children lose the feeling of connectedness with their families they lose a big piece of their identity. Whether children have a lot, a little, or no contact with their families, they remain emotionally attached to their parents. They think about them, worry about how they are doing, and fear that they may never be together again. If they do not see or hear from their parents, they fantasize about them. Consider the implications of these realities, and discuss why this might be difficult for foster parents to understand and accept.
- Some foster parents believe that the child will be grateful and relieved to be out of their home situation. This is rarely the case. Abuse or neglect may be all the child knows; it may be his/her “normal.” Discuss the need to be prepared for the child to be anything but happy about being in a foster home.
- For children to develop a sense of trust within their family, they must feel that issues of importance to them are shared honestly and that talking about them freely is permitted in the home. Discuss how this is particularly important for foster children who often feel a loss of control about what is happening in their lives, are moved with little or no preparation, and are seldom asked about their feelings.
- Discuss how children’s feelings about who they are, or can be, are affected by the messages they hear from others about their families. If they believe their parents are bad people, they may believe they are bad as well.
- Caseworkers have an important role to play in keeping kids connected by facilitating and supporting birth/foster family relationships. What kinds of casework practices can be changed or initiated in your agency to encourage communication and cooperation between foster and birth families?

### **Resources to Explore**

- The Importance of Birth Parents to Children in Care – Ner Littner
- A Young Child’s View of Foster Care - Best Practice, Next Practice Newsletter, Summer 2003
- Children’s Reactions to Loss: Common Behavior Patterns of the Grieving Process - Denise Goodman
- Helping Children with Birth Family Connections
- Tips on Promoting Birth Family Foster Family Teams
- Telling the Whole Truth to Adopted and Foster Care Children: Why Do Children Need to Know the Facts? - Jane Schooler

## Chapter Three: Crossing Bridges

*“You’ve got to find common ground. The common ground is the child.”*

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion**

- All foster parents enter shared parenting relationships with birth families and caseworkers the moment a foster child arrives in their home. Discuss how those relationships exist regardless of the amount of contact the “co-parents” have with each other, and how they impact decisions about the child’s welfare.
- Discuss the “shared parenting” relationships that many parents experience with other people (for example, grandparents, other extended family members, teachers, child care providers, others who share some responsibilities with the parents for the child’s welfare) and how those relationships are analogous to shared parenting between for birth and foster families.
- Beginning a relationship can be very frightening for both birth and foster families who may feel anxious about and competitive with each other. Discuss why birth families may feel hopeless, powerless, and angry. Discuss foster families’ possible feelings of insecurity about their ability to communicate and work with people whom they perceive to be very different from themselves. What can caseworkers/agencies do to minimize these natural apprehensions and start the relationship off on a positive footing?
- One of the greatest losses a parent faces when a child is in foster care is the opportunity to make day-to-day decisions about their child. What are some of the decisions that may be important to the birth parent, such as, the child’s hairstyle, clothing, etc.? Discuss how foster parents can include birth parents in making those decisions.
- It has been said that Empathy, Genuineness, and Respect are the building blocks of positive relationships. Consider the definition of each and the implications for effective communication between foster parents, birth parents, and caseworkers. Genuineness (that is, honesty and full disclosure) is particularly important to building trust. Discuss how concerns about confidentiality can be overcome to avoid the negative consequences that secrets and surprises have on teamwork and cooperation.

## Chapter Three (Continued)

### Resources to Explore

- Shared Parenting - NYSCCC Factsheet
- Foster Families Working With Birth Families to help Move Children to Timely Permanence - Natl. Resource Center on Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning
- Communication Basics – Excerpt, National CASA Association Training Manual
- The Reflective Foster Parent - Michael Neff, Esq.
- Empathy, Genuineness, and Respect: The Building Blocks of Relationship
- What Do You Think? - Electronic Newsletters on Permanency topics by Robert G. Lewis, MSW, [www.highpopples.com/archive.htm](http://www.highpopples.com/archive.htm) (see shared parenting topics in particular)
- Fostering Perspectives: Working With Birth Families, North Carolina Division of Social Services, [http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/fp/fp\\_vol4no2/vol4no2\\_birthparents.htm](http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/fp/fp_vol4no2/vol4no2_birthparents.htm)
- Bridging the Gap - Family to Family Tools for Recruiting and Retaining Foster Parents, Annie E. Casey Foundation - [www.aecf.org/Home/MajorInitiatives/Family to Family/Resources.aspx](http://www.aecf.org/Home/MajorInitiatives/Family%20to%20Family/Resources.aspx)

## Chapter Four: Understanding Birth Parents

*“We must remember that parents love their children.  
No matter what caused them to break up in life, they love their children.”*

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion**

- An important part of understanding birth parents is understanding the circumstances, behaviors, or life choices that may lead to child maltreatment. Parents don’t plan to abuse or neglect their children. Children who come into care don’t come from ideal situations. They come from families who are unable to deal with problems or work through a crisis. The family dynamics that lead to and perpetuate maltreatment of children are very complex, and the source is seldom found in one single element or cause. Discuss how stress affects families and the conditions and risk factors that may lead to abuse and neglect of children.
- In the majority of daily relationships people interact as peers and can choose to engage in or discontinue relationships with others based on their comfort level, needs, and interests. Think about how it must feel for birth parents to have strangers caring for their children against their will and the power imbalance that represents. Discuss how those feelings might impact the willingness of birth parents to meet, form a relationship with, and trust foster parents.
- Foster families may feel angry, fearful, or critical of birth families that have maltreated or failed to care for their children. Discuss the importance of acknowledging, understanding, and resolving negative feelings towards birth families in order to support the child.
- Foster parents who are non-judgmental and able to emphasize birth parent strengths, while acknowledging challenges to be overcome, help children to feel good about themselves and realistic about why they are in care. Discuss how negative parent behaviors/attitudes might be reframed as strengths and then communicated to the child. For instance, anger at a child’s removal can indicate how much a parent cares about and misses the child.

### **Resources to Explore**

- Birth Parent Feelings about Separation – Excerpt, National CASA Association Training Manual
- A Guide for Parents with Children in Foster Care- NYC Administration for Children
- Family Stress and Risk Factors Associated with Child Abuse and Neglect
- Assessing Strength in Children and Families - St. Christopher Otilie, Inc.
- The Bio Bond – Arvin Publications, [www.arvinpublications.com/foster3.html](http://www.arvinpublications.com/foster3.html)
- The Birth Family Guide to the System, - Child Welfare League of America, [www.cwla.org/childwelfare/familyguide.htm](http://www.cwla.org/childwelfare/familyguide.htm)

## Chapter Five: Visits Are Hard

*“Visits are hard for the kids, and they are really hard for the parents.”*

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion**

- It is very important for visitation to begin as soon as possible. If we wait weeks or months, children and their parents may lose hope, and other activities may fill the lives of both children and their families. Discuss who should be involved in setting up the visitation schedule, what kind of factors should be taken in account, and how can arrangements be facilitated.
- Acting out after visits is only natural for children. It doesn't necessarily mean the visit didn't go well. Saying goodbye can be hard for children who aren't sure when they will see their parents again. The more frequently children can visit with their parents, the more they will trust that “goodbye” is temporary, and visitation will become less stressful for everybody.
- Visits are extremely stressful and emotional for birth parents. One of the ways they might cope with stress is by not showing up. Discuss some of the reasons parents might miss visits and how families and caseworkers can support, rather than demand, their participation.
- Parents shouldn't only “visit” their children. What they need are opportunities to parent and/or learn to parent their children in as normal an environment as possible. Discuss how foster parents and agencies can develop creative visiting plans to help parents learn and practice successful parenting skills and keep the parent involved in all aspects of the child's daily life. Discuss the foster parent's role as a mentor to birth families.
- Sometimes parents are unrealistic about the difficulties and challenges of parenting, and they may be unrealistic about reunification plans. Discuss how parenting-focused visits can help them to understand and gauge their own ability and interest in parenting and reunification.
- Discuss how support for and participation in regular and frequent visits can benefit foster parents by helping them understand the child's relationship with birth family, learn more about the child's past, and better understand his/her behaviors.

### **Resources to Explore**

- Family Visiting for Children in Out of Home Care - NYS OCFS Informational Letter, (pdf)
- Advocating for Creative Visitation, The Center for Family Representation
- Best Practice Guidelines for Family Visiting – NYC Administration for Children's Services (pdf)
- Family / Child Visiting - A collection of articles and resources from the National Resource Center for Family-centered Practice and Permanency Planning, [http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info\\_services/family-child-visiting.html](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/family-child-visiting.html)
- Making Visits Better: the Perspectives of Parents, Foster Parents and Child Welfare Workers – The University of Illinois, <http://cfrcwww.social.uiuc.edu/pubs/pdf.files/visitperspectives.pdf>
- Parent / Child Visits Practice Notes – North Carolina Division of Social Services, [http://sswnt7.sowo.unc.edu/fcrp/Cspn/vol5\\_no4.htm](http://sswnt7.sowo.unc.edu/fcrp/Cspn/vol5_no4.htm)

## Chapter Six: Finding Support

*“We need to call on our resources in order to be effective.”*

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion**

- The caregiver’s role in the foster care system has evolved into one in which demands and requirements are great, but incentives, such as, support, responsiveness, and involvement in decision making, may be minimal. Discuss support services that are available for foster parents in the agency and the community and how foster parents can be involved in the development of increased services.
- Foster parents (especially new ones) need information, support, and empathy to meet the daily challenges, uncertainties, and ambiguities of fostering. Communication and experience sharing with other foster parents can be effective means of providing all of these. Discuss the differences between agency support groups and independent foster parent led associations and why each has a place in supporting families.
- Parent groups and associations can provide invaluable services to their members by assisting them to locate community services and resources to address the complex special needs common to foster and adopted children. Discuss how parents can help themselves—and group leaders can help their members—by becoming "service detectives" to uncover and access needed services.
- Knowledge is a powerful source of support. How can foster parents be provided with and encouraged to use the ongoing education and training they need to participate as full members of the permanency planning team and meet the challenges of working with children with special needs?
- Discuss reasons why foster parents may be reluctant to admit they are having problems and ask for the support they need. How can agencies encourage them to seek out and use services and openly discuss their concerns or problems without fear of reprisal?

### **Resources to Explore**

- Becoming a Service Detective – Locating Helping Resources for Families
- Supports I Wish Were Available in My Community - A foster parent wish list compiled at the Fall 2003 NYSCCC LINK Family Gathering,
- The Agency Role in Supporting Birth/Foster Family Collaboration – Heather Craig-Olsen
- Supporting and Retaining Foster Parents - The National Council of State Legislatures, [www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/slr2711.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/slr2711.htm)
- Starting and Nurturing a Parent Group: A Guide for Leaders - North American Council on Adoptable Children, <http://www.nacac.org/parentgroups/parentgroups.html>
- Foster/Adoptive Parent Group Resources – A collection of web links and articles from the NYS Citizens’ Coalition for Children, Inc., [www.nysccc.org](http://www.nysccc.org)

## Chapter Seven: Going Home

*“The relationship is still important today. It didn’t end when she left my home.”*

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion**

- “Going home” ensures a child’s permanent connection to a safe, loving family that is truly the child’s own. It can mean different things for different children. Discuss the different forms of permanency: reunification with the birth parents, kinship placement, adoption, legal guardianship, or another permanent connection to a caring adult.
- Children should not have to lose the people they care about when they gain permanency in their lives. Reunification or adoption should not mean that children lose contact with foster families and others who are meaningful to them, and termination of parental rights does not necessarily mean termination of parental relationships. Discuss ways to maintain and support children’s relationships with those the child cares about or considers “family.”
- When preparing children to move on, don’t forget or overlook the child’s relationships with foster siblings or birth siblings who may have returned home or been adopted by another family. Discuss how these relationships can be supported.
- Foster parents have an important role and obligation to support a child’s transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Discuss the impact the foster parents’ attitudes towards the discharge plan can have on its potential for success. How can foster families give children “permission” to move on and help them with their feelings of uncertainty about the future?
- It is natural for foster families to feel grief and loss when children leave. However, they can also feel gratified and a sense of accomplishment for helping a child return home or find another permanent family. Discuss the implications of these feelings. What kind of understanding and support should agencies extend to foster families to help them work through their appropriate and conflicting emotions?

### **Resources to Explore**

- When Foster Children Leave: Helping Foster Parents to Grieve - Susan Edlestein
- Reaching Permanence – NYC Administration for Children’s Services Practice Manual, (pdf)
- Preparing Kids for Adoption – Professional Parenting, Arvin Publications, [www.arvinpublications.com/foster6.html](http://www.arvinpublications.com/foster6.html)
- When a Child Leaves – Professional Parenting, Arvin Publications, [www.arvinpublications.com/foster7.html](http://www.arvinpublications.com/foster7.html)
- Thoughts on Foster Parent Grief - <http://www.fosterparents.com/articles/index58grief.html>

## Chapter Eight: One Life at a Time

*"We can't change the world, but we can do our best, one life at a time."*

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion**

- A shortage of foster homes can mean children are placed on the basis of expediency and available space, rather than matched with families in consideration of cultural/ethnic similarities, proximity to birth families and friends, and a foster family's ability to meet a child's specific needs. Discuss what it would take to increase the number of available foster homes in your agency/community.
- Surveys of former foster parents consistently reveal that a significant reason families decide to leave fostering is a lack of clarity about expected foster family roles, rights and responsibilities, and a lack of support and respect from caseworkers. Think again about empathy, genuineness, and respect and discuss things agencies, caseworkers, and foster parents themselves can do differently to improve foster parent/agency relationships.
- Discuss how foster parents' participation in and understanding of service plan reviews and family court hearings can help ensure permanency plans meet a child's best interest. Identify and discuss resources and strategies foster parents can use to understand and exercise their legitimate roles and responsibilities in the permanency planning process.
- Advocacy is a required skill for foster parents who must interact with multiple systems of care and service providers who may have little understanding of foster care. Discuss the characteristics of successful advocates. Discuss how foster parents can educate themselves and others to obtain appropriate services for the children and youth in their care and to effect changes that benefit kids.
- A first step to effecting change is believing it is possible. Discuss the following quotes:
  - *"You really can change the world if you care enough."* - Marion Wright Edelman, President, Children's Defense Fund
  - *"We all must work to make this world worthy of its children."* - Pablo Casals
  - *"Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."* - Margaret Mead
  - *"The best tool we have to change the world is our capacity to change our minds about the world."* - Pat O'Brien, President, You Gotta Believe!

## Chapter Eight (Continued)

### Resources to Explore

- Advice for Foster Parents in the Post-ASFA World - Margaret Burt, Esq
- Effective Foster Parent Advocacy in Permanency Planning Hearings, Margaret Burt, Esq
- Foster Families and Leadership - Al Stumph,
- Advocating for Your Foster Child - Adoption in Child Time, Inc., [www.nysccc.org/Video/FosterCareAdvo.pdf](http://www.nysccc.org/Video/FosterCareAdvo.pdf)
- Advocacy, Taking Action to Make a Difference - North American Council on Adoptable Children, Inc., <http://www.nacac.org/parentgroups/advocacy.html>
- Why Become a Foster Parent - Child Welfare League of America, includes advocacy and foster parent support tips for those who decide not to foster. [www.cwla.org/articles/cv0305foster.htm](http://www.cwla.org/articles/cv0305foster.htm)