

Rise

'IT WON'T HAPPEN AGAIN'

Stories about reunification by parents affected by the child welfare system



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Stories about reunification by parents affected by the child welfare system



About Rise

Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

Our print magazine, *Rise*, reaches 18,000 parents nationwide. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use *Rise* stories in support groups, parenting education classes and staff training. We partner with advocacy organizations to use *Rise* stories in child welfare reform. Learn more about *Rise* at our website www.risemagazine.org

About This Booklet

Many stories in this booklet were written by participants in a writing group at the Child Welfare Organizing Project, a parent peer-support and advocacy organization: www.cwop.org. Others were written by participants in a *Rise* writing workshop at the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park: www.cflsp.org.

To develop this booklet, we worked with Youth Communication, publisher of *Represent*, a magazine by and for youth in foster care, www.youthcomm.org.

Discussion guides were developed by social workers Liza Blank and Rachel Blustain, Youth Communication Editorial Director Laura Longhine and *Rise* Director Nora McCarthy.



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Leader's Guide

How to use Rise stories on reunification in parenting classes and support groups.

Our parenting education and support resources are designed to help you easily integrate parents' stories into your work. You can integrate stories into parenting classes or parent support groups, or easily design a new group using Rise stories.

Choosing Stories: Stories in this booklet focus on preparing for reunification, overcoming guilt and shame, and handling children's anger and fear after they come home. Parents involved with the child welfare system need support in re-learning to parent their children and developing confidence about their ability to safely care for their children.

Use Rise Stories to Build Rapport

Most group work begins with activities to build a sense of safety and rapport with group participants. Reading a Rise story on a general topic you will cover in the group can help establish that parents' perspectives and knowledge will be honored in your group. Reading a story out loud together can help everyone in the group feel less alone and find commonalities with other participants. It can help your parenting class or support group start out from a place of trust and confidence.

After a simple introductory exercise, like a game to remember people's names, or an overview of what you hope to accomplish in the group or class, pass out copies of a Rise story on a topic that relates to your group. Ask volunteers to each read a short section of the story. You can open up a discussion using the discussion guide, or by asking simple questions that will help the group find common ground: What can you relate to about this story? What did the writer do that you might like to try?

Use Rise Stories to Bring a Child Welfare Focus to Parenting Education

If you are using a general parenting curriculum, use Rise stories to tailor the class to the needs and concerns of parents who are reunifying with children in foster care. Parents who feel unsure whether they can try the new parenting techniques or styles after reunification will be shored up by reading about the experiences of other parents who learned new parenting skills in order to successfully reunify with their children. If you plan to add Rise stories to a parenting education curriculum, match our topics to the weekly parenting concepts you will cover in your group or consider adding a final segment that focuses on reunification. Rise stories can bring a child welfare focus to a general parenting class.

Use Rise Stories to Enhance Cultural Competency

Many child welfare-affected parents are skeptical of techniques taught in parenting classes, which they see as reflecting a white or middle-class style. Most of our stories are written by black and Latino parents. Rise stories demonstrate how these parents have found comfortable solutions to parenting dilemmas. Integrate our stories into your parenting curriculum or hand out stories for parents to read at home to bring diverse experiences to your classes.

Use Rise Stories to Create a Reunification Support Group

To bring some structure to support groups in which parents take the lead in supporting, guiding and encouraging each other, consider beginning some or all discussions by reading a Rise story. Reading a story can set an open, thoughtful tone and help parents feel more comfortable opening up. Filling out the worksheet can help participants think through steps they may want to take based on ideas raised in the support group discussion. If you are setting up a reunification support group, you can ask parent participants to identify their goals or the topics they would like to discuss and match our stories to their needs. You can also use the stories in the order suggested in this booklet.

Overview: How to Use the Discussion Guides

Each guide has a discussion topic (such as “Establishing routines and structures” or “Using play to connect with your child”) and summary of the story. Prepare by photocopying the story and journal reflection worksheet for each participant. Develop the discussion by following these steps:

- 1) Use the paragraph-long introduction to explain the day’s topic to your group.
- 2) Hand out copies of the story.
- 3) Ask group members to take turns reading short sections of the story out loud.
- 4) Use our suggested discussion questions tied to specific story moments to help group members open up about their own experiences.
- 5) Hand out journal reflection worksheets that accompany each story. These help parent participants reflect on their own experiences and write down the steps they would like to take in applying what they’ve learned.
- 6) Ask participants to complete the reflection questions and action steps in the group or at home. Participants can share their responses with the group, with a partner in the group, with their caseworker, lawyer or therapist, or another resource they identify.

(Reading and discussion time: 45 minutes-1 hour. Worksheet completion and discussion time 15-45 minutes.)



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LEADER'S GUIDE:

Taking It Slow by Bertha Marquez

I have farther to go before Barbie comes home.

DISCUSSION FOCUS:

Getting ready to reunify

ACTIVITY GOAL:

Participants will consider their feelings and parenting during visits and define steps they can take to get ready for reunification.

STORY SUMMARY

During weekly visits, Bertha takes care to show her daughter Barbie that she loves her and that their bond is still strong. She has recently been granted weekend visits, but acknowledges she is not ready to have Barbie come home for good.

From situations that have already come up during visits, Bertha knows that having her daughter back home will be stressful. She wants to finish working through her own issues first, so she can be confident that she can take care of Barbie without relapsing.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we are going to talk about hopes and worries around reunifying with your children, and how to know when you're ready for them to come home. Although getting children back from foster care is a happy occasion, it also creates new stresses in your life. If you're recovering from an addiction, it's important to think about how you will handle those stresses without relapsing. We'll talk about how you can use visits with your children to figure out what you need to do to prepare yourself.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer’s emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they’ve handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Bertha makes special efforts to reassure Barbie of her love.	What things do you do to show your children that you care?
Bertha is “not rushing” to have her daughter come home.	When you think about reunifying, do you feel ready? What things are you most nervous about?
Bertha fears that the stress of having her daughter home while she’s clean will cause her to relapse.	What coping mechanisms have you learned to deal with stress without relapsing?
Bertha and her daughter spend their first weekend visit together fixing up her bedroom so she will feel comfortable there.	What do you do—or could you do—to make your children feel at home?
Bertha gets nervous when Barbie gives her a small challenge and it reminds her of her old feelings.	Have your children ever done something during a visit that reminded you of a bad situation in the past? How did you handle it?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their experiences and the steps they can take to strengthen themselves and their families. Hand out the “Journal Reflections” worksheet and give participants 15-30 minutes to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a counselor, therapist, or peer.

Taking It Slow

I have farther to go before Barbie comes home.

By Bertha Marquez

I had always thought I was a good mother even though I used drugs. I gave my daughter, Barbie, everything she needed, like food, clothes and a home. I gave her love, too, by holding her and kissing her and playing with her. I would look in amazement at how beautiful she was growing and how confident she was about herself.

But even though all this was true, part of me was kidding myself. When I used drugs, the chemicals altered my mood. I wouldn't want to talk to my daughter or play with her. I would tell her to go to her room.

I also didn't send her to school on a regular basis, although at the time I didn't know that was neglect. I grew up very poor in Puerto Rico, and my mother didn't send me to school most of my life so I thought that was normal, but that's what finally got my daughter taken from me.

I had my addiction for a long time, maybe 18 years. I used the drugs to take the edge off the anxiety I often felt and also because I enjoyed the feeling of being high. At the time, I didn't

know that I might be addicted. But I was.

Neglecting My Daughter for Drugs

When Barbie was 5, my addiction became worse. I lost my job at North General Hospital and that really destroyed me. I hated not making my own money, and having to apply for unemployment and welfare, receiving only what the state thinks you deserve when you are poor.

I became so depressed that I started using drugs every day. I didn't have any support and drugs gave me the security and comfort I needed. I just wanted to forget my misery, but instead my addiction began to control my life. I needed a hit just to keep up with my daily routines. It became very hard for me to take care of Barbie.

When Barbie was 8 years old and child welfare came to take her from me, I thought I could convince them that I was a good mother, because I had convinced myself. But they weren't convinced, and that's when I began looking more closely at myself. I realized I was neglecting my daughter for drugs. I felt very dreadful about the

whole situation.

'Mamá Is Trying'

The first time I saw my daughter after she went into foster care, we met at the agency, in the children's room. The room was clean and cozy, with decorations on the walls, set up to make parents and children feel relaxed and comfortable. Instead, I felt depressed. I was sitting and crying and feeling awful.

I told my daughter, "Barbie, I love you. I am not perfect. I am a sinner. Mothers are human and make mistakes. Please don't judge. Instead of judging, let's work together and be a team. Don't think things can't get better because our lives are apart for now. I love you. Mami is trying to become a better person as well as a mother for you."

Barbie was calm and she looked happy, confident and relaxed. At 8 she already understood a lot. I think she knew deep inside her heart that I had a problem and that I needed help. She told me not to cry, that everything was OK and would be OK. She gave me a Bible to read and told me to read it every day.

The visit ended and I kissed her and she kissed me. Until next week. I felt sad to be apart from my daughter. But I also felt relieved knowing that my daughter and I still bonded with love and communication.

Stressed and Angry

Since that first meeting, I have continued to love my daughter and communicate with her, even though she is still in the foster care system. I strongly believe that no matter what happens in your life or your child's life, love and communication should always be the main thing.

Unfortunately, many times when children go into foster care, the relationship between parents and children grows worse instead of better.

Parents are usually stressed and angry that the system has invaded their lives, and often kids are too, and they take that anger out on each other. Instead of communicating the right way, parents and children let the anger take over. It doesn't help that in many ways the system is set up to make parents and children look at each other as the enemy. Too often that leads to parents rejecting the help they may need.

But I've made efforts to prove to my daughter that no one and nothing is going to get in between our love. After all, it's my job to love her, even if she's not living with me. I have tried to act in ways that let Barbie know she can depend on me, even though I am not there to take care of her every day.

When I visit Barbie at the agency, I am always on time, and Barbie and I play and color together. We talk about the things that are important to her and her growing up to be a responsible young lady. For her birthday, I bought cake, soda, candy and pizza for all the kids at the agency. Plus, I bought her a gift that she really wanted, a Game Boy Advanced with Mario. Whenever I see her, I hug her a lot and I look at her with love and grace. I am her friend.

Fighting For Help

From time to time, I try to talk to her about being in foster care. (Right now she is living with her grandmother on her father's side. It makes me feel better that she doesn't live with strangers.) I tell her that things in life happen for a reason. I also tell her that people are going to be judgmental but we are not in this world to live up to anybody's expectations but our own.

I tell her to live life to the fullest with the help of God and to disregard any negative judgment anyone has against her or her loved ones (mainly me). Barbie seems to understand when I say these things. I don't usually say much more because I don't want to overwhelm her with life's problems.

I've also tried to help our relationship by fighting for help, not resisting it. The day the system first took Barbie from me, I was confused, devastated and lost. I would have rather had the love of drugs than anything. I was numb, drugs were the only important thing to me.

Rehab and Support

But seven days later, I realized I needed to change and I started asking for help. I have also always been respectful to my caseworkers because I know that will help me spend more time with Barbie.

In turn the system has helped me. They recommended a drug treatment program I needed, as well as outpatient services. Not all the services I received helped me. The first detox place I went to I didn't feel like I was learning anything. But finally I was sent upstate and there I learned about how drugs work, what addiction is, and how I have to have a plan every day if I want to stay clean.

Rehab gave me the support and structure to break my physical addiction. That made me begin to value myself. I also joined The Child Welfare Organizing Project, a group of mothers with kids in the system. Before Barbie was taken from me, I had very little support from friends or family, so having this group to turn to has been important for me.

Not Ready for My Daughter to Come Home

I still feel like there are many issues I need to work through and I still struggle with depression and anxiety, so I would like to go to therapy. I have also suffered some episodes of domestic violence that I feel I need to deal with. And I want Barbie to attend Al-Anon meetings—which are for relatives of alcoholics and drug abusers—because I know she needs a chance to share her feelings.

There's practical help I need too, even with little stuff, like being on time. I'm almost always late, except to visit Barbie. All of the services I have received already have helped me overcome many difficulties, but I still have farther to go.

That's why I am not rushing to have my daughter come home before I am more confident that I am ready to care for her. After all, I have never dealt with the stress of having her home while I was clean, and I fear that I could overwhelm myself and relapse. I don't want to do that to myself or to Barbie.

Even though she seems strong, I know that Barbie is affected by all that she's gone through with me. I think if she came home and had to live with the fear of being removed again that would be a tragedy. I don't want my daughter to feel like life's so hard that she could drown in a glass of water.

Until recently, I had visits with Barbie just once a week, but now I've received permission to have her for entire weekends. When Barbie was home with me last weekend, we had a wonderful time. We cleaned her room and painted it two shades of light pink so she could feel comfortable and happy sleeping there. I also bought her the Power Puff sleeping accessories and I put up

a poster of Mickey Mouse, because that's what I like, and she put up a poster of her favorite rap group. Then we went downstairs to jump rope.

But when Barbie and I went outside, I told her to put her jacket on because it was chilly, but Barbie refused and she gave me a little challenge. It was just a small thing, but I became nervous and distracted by it. I remembered when I was getting high and I would tell her to do something and she wouldn't. At those times, it felt like more than I could deal with, but now I know that it shouldn't be. Still, I have those old feelings with me so I know I need help to learn how to deal with situations like those.

A Chance to Breathe

Truthfully, I believe that I was lucky that the system came into my life and that I have had this time away from my daughter to get to know me. I don't want to sound selfish, but it gave me a chance to breathe and come to terms with myself and get help from other people, all of which I appreciate.

And I am proud that my daughter and I have been able to have such a good, loving relationship even while she's in care. When children go into foster care, it's very easy to think that the parent is entirely bad. But if parents can be a loving presence in their children's lives even while they're in care, it will probably be easier for the children to forgive their parents and also to live their own lives.

Parents need to understand that both they and their children will feel anger, guilt and confusion, and that given the situation, these feelings are natural. They need to accept these feelings in themselves and in their children.

If you can love yourself and love your children,

love will conquer all. Try to stay in touch with feelings of love. That has been my solution. Love is giving me the strength to fight for both me and my daughter.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: Taking It Slow by Bertha Marquez

Bertha does not want her daughter to come home until she feels confident that she will be able to care for her without relapsing. Though she's gotten clean and is making positive changes in her life, she knows she has more to deal with before she'll be ready.

Write in your journal (or below) about the changes you're making in your life to prepare for reuniting with your children.

What particular situations or behaviors in your children have been hard to handle during visits?

What do you think would help you to feel more confident in handling those situations?

Think about the positive changes you have made in your own life. How will these changes help you to manage having your children at home?

OVER \longrightarrow

What other changes would you like to make before you reunify?

ACTION STEPS

Write down 2-3 steps you'd like to take to help prepare you for having your children home.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:



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LEADER'S GUIDE:

'I'm Sorry, My Son' by Yadira Fragoso

When my husband and I split up, my son needed more than I could give.

DISCUSSION FOCUS:

Overcoming guilt

ACTIVITY GOAL:

Participants will recognize the impact of stress and depression on their children and the steps to becoming dependable again.

STORY SUMMARY

Yadira describes the challenges she faces parenting her children after she and their father split up. When her oldest son is younger, Yadira takes many steps to nurture and educate him but she has trouble responding to her younger son's needs after the separation because of depression and stress.

As she comes out of her depression, she tries to make it up to her younger son but at times still suffers from guilt.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we'll talk about how kids are affected when parents feel unable to give them the attention they need. Parents may be incapable of responding to their children's needs for many reasons: depression, stress, addiction, domestic violence, or separations. Once a stressful period has passed, we may feel guilty and sad that we weren't able to do our best. We may see signs that our children were negatively affected by our physical or emotional absence—or worry that we do. Re-establishing normal routines and boundaries, and not letting guilt interfere with your parenting, helps get children back on track.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?



READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Yadira enjoys motherhood when her older son is little and she is energetic about taking care of him.	What are your strengths as a parent?
When she becomes depressed, Yadira is less responsive to her children and expects too much.	When have you noticed that your expectations of your child were more than your child could handle?
When Yadira acts in a way she later feels badly about, she takes her son into her arms and kisses him all over.	How do you—or can you—make up with your child immediately after you act in a way that you regret?
Yadira's guilt and shame about not being emotionally available to her son when he was a baby sometimes lead her to baby her son now.	How do guilt or shame affect your parenting?
Yadira wishes she could make up for the past and is weighed down by her past behavior.	What is a positive way to apologize to your children for problems in the past and move forward?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their experiences and the steps they can take to strengthen themselves and their families. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants 15-30 minutes to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a counselor, therapist, or peer.

'I'm Sorry, My Son'

When my husband and I split up, my baby needed more than I could give.

By Yadira Fragoso

Translated from Spanish.

When my second son, Steven, was six months old, my husband and I separated. My life totally changed. I had to take care of Steven and his older brother, Stuart, who was only 2, and continue working in the restaurant where my husband, Pedro, also worked. That was the beginning of the worst period of my life.

Pedro and I had I started having some problems before I got pregnant with Steven. Pedro didn't want to have a second child, and I did.

Pedro had also started to go out fishing and playing soccer often. When the weekends would arrive, I'd say, "Let's go to the park with Stuart," and he'd say, "You bring him, because I'm tired." I would start to cry and I wouldn't bring him to the park because I was used to going everywhere with Pedro.

Separation and Depression

Even though our second child, Steven, was a baby we planned to have, things didn't go as well

for our family after he was born. Pedro didn't always have work. When Steven was four months old, Pedro and I decided that we would both go to work in a restaurant to make more money.

I worked the night shift so that I could watch them in the morning and Pedro could take them at night. I felt like our married life was starting to come together economically, but emotionally, things weren't better between us, but worse. Finally, we split up.

After Pedro moved out, I fell into a depression, crying all the time and enduring terrible migraines.

To handle my feelings, I dedicated myself to my job and didn't pay a lot of attention to my sons. The worst part was seeing the difference in the lives of my two babies. Steven had to witness my arguments and my desperation, while as Stuart had grown older, he'd been able to share his life with his mother and father.

Close to Our Son

When Stuart was little, I had enjoyed motherhood a lot, and Pedro and I spent a lot of time with our son. We tried to give him the best childhood we could.

I wanted Stuart to become a very smart kid. I'd heard that if you talk to babies, telling them what you want them to become, it'll come true. So when he was just a little baby, I whispered in his ear while he was sleeping, saying, "Stuart, you have to be a very intelligent baby, and you should enjoy going to school a lot, so that when you are big you can have an important job where you want. Always be a good boy."

After a long search, I found a daycare for Stuart and I went back to work when he was 8 months old. Obviously it wasn't everything I might want in a daycare, but it was a place where I knew that they were going to take good care of him. It gave me a good feeling to see how Stuart continued growing. Right away, he started the typical game of saying, "Give me five," and with great enthusiasm he'd slap my hand!

Teaching Our Son at Home

Pedro and I were always finding ways to teach him new things. When I took Stuart out shopping with me, I taught him the names of the fruits and vegetables, and said to him, "This is a car, a bus, a truck," and so on. Pedro and I also brought Stuart to the library to read, and borrowed books to read in the house.

When Stuart was almost a year old, I found out from a friend of mine about special classes for toddlers. I asked my social worker, but she said they were only for children with trouble speaking or with other problems. Even so, I asked for Stuart to get evaluated, and it turned out he could attend the special school. The school sug-

gested that a teacher come to my home three times a week for an hour so that Stuart wouldn't forget what he learned.

When Stuart started his classes, I felt very good and content with myself as a mother. Over the two years he took them (until he turned 3 years old), I felt so proud of him. He learned the colors, numbers, and the ABCs, and improved so much in his speaking. I also asked Pedro if we could buy him English without Barriers for children so that Stuart could continue practicing English. Once the classes ended, I put on those videos, and through them, he learned new things.

'We'll Always Love You'

When I got pregnant with Steven, Pedro and I prepared Stuart by taking a book out of the library called, "The Baby's Arrival." I remember it well. It was the story of a pregnant mom who was ready to go to the hospital, and when the baby was born, returned home with the baby in her arms.

I said to Stuart, "Look, here under my tummy I have a baby that is going to be your brother, and when he's born, you shouldn't get angry, because your father and I will always love you." Stuart said to me, "Ok, Mami," and he hugged me and kissed my belly.

When I was almost ready to give birth to Steven, I asked Pedro if we could decorate the room so that it would look nice and give a good welcome to my Steven. Not much later, he was born.

'Where is Papi?'

When Pedro and I split up, my sons and I suffered a lot. It was up to me to help Stuart in the process of understanding our separation from his father. Stuart would ask me, "Where is my

Papi? I miss him.” My tears flowed and I didn’t know how to answer him. I’d invent excuses, like that he’d had to go work far away and that he was going to come back to see him and his brother.

But Steven suffered the most. During this time, I treated Steven as a child, not a baby. By that I mean that I would yell at him if he wanted something. If he cried, I would get annoyed and tell him to stop it. Sometimes when Steven wanted to play, I’d say, “Not now, I don’t have time for that,” or I’d ask Stuart to play with his little brother.

I remember one day that my Steven, when he was just 6 months, was crying and I got angry. I screamed, “All right, shut up now! What do you want?” and I left the room. I went to the kitchen and sat thinking, “What am I doing? He’s a baby! He’s not at fault for what happened.” I felt so bad about the way I reacted.

Then I returned to the room crying, and I held him and said, “I’m sorry, my son, it’s not your fault. I’m sorry.” I hugged him and kissed him so many times until I felt better.

Of course, that’s not how I treated him all the time. I also was loving. But it hurts me to realize how different I was with him than I was with Stuart.

My Babies Needed Me

I knew that that my sons’ lives couldn’t be OK if I wasn’t OK. My babies needed me. They were the main reason I had to keep me from allowing myself to be completely defeated.

Fortunately, I had a number of people helping me so that I didn’t fall apart completely. Thank God I could count on the support of my co-

madre, Tere, and my sister, who both loved me so much.

I also continued with therapy and it helped me understand that my world didn’t end with the separation and that I could become stronger day by day.

One day I arrived at my appointment undone, crying because I felt so bad. Unburdening myself to my therapist helped. She listened to me and said, “Yadira, you’re a great woman, and I understand that you’re sad—it’s a difficult situation to confront—but everything will be OK. You can do it.” Oh! Those words really made me feel good.

She suggested that I try to occupy my time taking the babies to the park and reading them a book every night, and I did that, trying to remain calm even when they misbehaved.

For a while I went out with a friend who was lovely with my babies and me. On Halloween, he accompanied me to buy costumes for Stuart and Steven, and we took them out to trick or treat. Although I felt happy while I was with him, when I returned home I felt flattened again.

Finally, I decided to take Stuart and Steven with me to Mexico for a year so we could live with my family. Being home with my mother, and dedicating more of my time to my sons, helped me a lot.

Still Feeling Guilty

After a year in Mexico, my sons and I moved back to New York in the fall.

Even though I’d say 75 percent of the depression I felt when Pedro and I separated has lifted, I still don’t have as much time with my sons as I’d like

because of the hours of my job. I wish I didn't have to work and I could stay at home teaching them and showing my love to my children.

Now Steven is 3 years old and I feel like I have given him more of my time. I always hold him close and kiss him, telling him, "You're my baby." (Although maybe that's not right, because now if Pedro asks him, "Are you my baby?" he says, "No." If Pedro says, "Are you Mama's baby?" he says, "Yes.")

My Steven seems a little bit restless and unsure of himself at times. If I want him to sit with me and draw or watch some children's videos together like I did with Stuart, he'll only be entertained for five minutes and then he'll get up and do something else.

I sit with him to do his homework, which is a little difficult, but we do it. I feel very proud of him because now that he goes to daycare, he's started to speak a few sentences in English.

Pedro tells me that Steven is a child that cries a lot and doesn't obey because whenever I yell at him, afterwards I soothe him. That might be true. What makes me do it is my sense of guilt that I didn't treat him like a baby when he needed me to.

I think that it's going to take a long time for this feeling of guilt to leave my heart. I still leave with the fear that Steven will reproach me for the difference in the way I treated him. I think I won't rest until I can hear my son, when he's older, tell me, "Don't feel bad about what happened, Mami. I understand."

Proud of Myself

Stuart is already 5 years old and graduating this spring from kindergarten. I feel proud of my

sons, who are both so sweet and handsome. At night, we sing a lot of songs together. They tell me I'm the best mother in the world, and I feel proud of myself.

It's been three years since I was turned upside down, and I see that I'm on my feet, continuing my fight to move forward, and always in the company of my sons.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: 'I'm Sorry, My Son' by Yadira Fragoso

Yadira sees that her younger son, Steven, is more withdrawn than her older son, and she blames herself for the differences in their natures. She fears that Steven will blame her if he has problems when he is older. She feels unsure about how to be a good mother to him without babying him out of guilt.

Take some time to reflect on how you can help your children feel safe again after a difficult time and how you can forgive yourself. Use the questions below to guide your reflections.

1. What was a difficult time that you went through? How did it affect your parenting?

2. What concerns do you have about how that difficult time might have affected your children?

3. How did that difficult time affect your confidence as a parent?

4. What would help you regain your confidence and your children's confidence in you?

ACTION STEPS

Children feel best when family life returns to normal. It doesn't help to baby or pamper children out of guilt. At the same time, it can be difficult to forgive yourself. Write down 2-3 steps you can take to reestablish normalcy with your children and forgive yourself.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:



www.risemagazine.org

LEADER'S GUIDE:

Breaking a Painful Pattern by Milagros Sanchez
My children won't grow up silenced and afraid.

DISCUSSION FOCUS:

Establishing routines to build safety

ACTIVITY GOAL:

Participants will understand how to incorporate routines and bonding activities into visits and prepare for reunification.

STORY SUMMARY

As a child, Milagros was abused and not listened to by her mother. After discovering her mother had a similar childhood, Milagros realizes her family has been caught in a pattern of abuse and silence. In drug treatment, she resolves to break that cycle with her own children.

She establishes regular routines and bonding activities with her children, and is open and honest about her addiction and their time in foster care. Although she experiences some setbacks, her efforts have led to more open communication and a stronger bond with her sons.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about your child's transition home from foster care. While parents and children look forward to reunification, they also worry about being together again. Children may feel angry, confused and sad about their time in care, and worried that they will return to foster care. Parents may feel the same way. You can use visits to establish routines and bond with your children, plan activities for overnights that help your children feel thought about and calm, and use structures like family meetings to continue addressing your children's concerns and your own after they return home.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?



READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Milagros's mother treats problems with silence and physical violence.	When you were a child, how did your parents deal with conflict? What lessons did you learn from that?
Milagros plans activities with her kids to help them bond.	What kinds of activities help you bond with your children?
Milagros has a setback in a stressful moment with her son.	When you're trying to make a change in your life, how do you deal with setbacks? What helps you get back on track?
Milagros resolves to talk through everything with her sons.	What can be difficult about talking to your children when problems come up? What makes it easier to be open with each other?
Milagros establishes a weekly "family conference" and "family game night."	What kinds of routines or traditions do you have with your children (or would you like to start)? How might these be helpful for your children?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their experiences and the steps they can take to strengthen themselves and their families. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants 15-30 minutes to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a counselor, therapist, or peer.

Breaking a Painful Pattern

My children won't grow up silenced and afraid.

By Milagros Sanchez

On Aug. 4, 1997, I got my sons back after they'd been in foster care and I'd been out on the streets for many years. I felt that God had given me a second chance in life to be the best mom I could be.

I was determined to be different toward my sons than my mother had been toward me. My mother and I had a bad relationship when I was a child. She resorted to violence whenever she was upset with me, and she didn't believe me when I came to her and told her I was being sexually abused. When I was a teenager, she put me in a group home, where I was sexually abused again.

For years she raised my sons when I turned to drugs to escape my pain. Then, after she died, they went into care. Finally, I went to rehab and they came home. Luckily, my mother and I were able to talk before she died, when I was in rehab. We shared more about our lives, and we made it a point to forgive one another.

When I learned about my mother's upbringing,

I realized that my family had a pattern of not speaking about our feelings and of physically abusing our children. I told myself, "I will make it my business to change that pattern when I get my life together." It wasn't easy, but I did.

Honest Answers

In the months before they returned home I built a bond with my boys. We spent every other weekend together and I always had something planned for us to do as a family. We went out to the movies, the beach, or the pool, and to museums and the library. Sometimes we would just stay home and play family games. I would also make them their favorite foods.

Every Friday we had a family conference. That was a chance for them to let out their feelings about what they went through. They were allowed to ask me any questions they wanted about my addiction and the time when I was not with them. Answering their questions, I would get very emotional, but it helped us get closer. It was a step toward breaking the silence and anger that had dominated my family's relation-

ships for too long.

My son JonPaul asked me why I left him with grandma for such a long time. He said, “Didn’t you love us? Was it something we did?” It was very hard for me to answer those questions. I prayed that they would forgive me for my honest answers.

I told my sons, “I had a drug problem, which took over my life and my mind. Even though I thought about you and loved you, the drugs were more important to me at the time. That was what the drugs were telling me. I left you with Grandma because I didn’t want to drag you into my world of drugs and insanity, too. But you were always in my heart and in my thoughts.”

I continued, “I was dealing with my own demons from my childhood. You did not have anything to do with that. And in no way did you do anything wrong. I was the one that messed up. But what’s important is that I’m here now and I love you guys to infinity and beyond.”

A Terrifying Moment

It wasn’t always easy to be a good mom. One afternoon I came home from work feeling very tired and found a message on my answering machine from JonPaul’s teacher. She said JonPaul, who was 12, was not showing up to school. Plus, he had never turned in the \$75 I gave him for his cap and gown.

I asked JonPaul, “What was that all about?” He was giving me all kinds of excuses, but when he said, “I don’t care and I can do what I want,” I just I totally lost it and started hitting on him. Almost without realizing what I was doing, I even grabbed him by his throat and started choking him.

He said, with tears in his eyes, “Mami, you’re choking me.” At that moment I saw myself in JonPaul and my mother in me. When I realized I was acting out the role of my mother, that scared the hell out of me. I panicked, let go and ran to the hallway where I sat on the steps and called my sister, sobbing.

When I calmed down, I hugged him and apologized and promised him that it would never happen again. After that, I recommitted myself to breaking my family’s pattern. I made a conscious decision that I would talk to my boys no matter what they do that upsets me, instead of treating them how my mother treated me.

Listening to My Son

Since then, I haven’t reacted so crazily to my children. I’ve realized that my son is still learning how to be a son and I am learning how to be a mother. Things have gotten better one day at a time.

Another time I was very upset with him was when the teacher informed me that JonPaul had not turned in any homework for a whole week and disrespected her in front of the other students.

I felt the heat rising in my head. But by the time JonPaul got home, I had calmed down and thought out a strategy of how to approach him in a positive way. We talked and I really listened to what he had to say.

Today I’m Blessed

Today I have a good relationship with my boys. I communicate with them, something my mother and father never did with me. We share our thoughts and feelings, whether good or bad. We go out together and, every other weekend, we have family game night. We all sit around the

table and play games like Parcheesi, Sorry, Charades and Operation.

At times, things get hectic, but we pull through. Like every teen and mom, we struggle together to understand one another. Together, we made a choice to break our family's pattern of violence and silence.

When I look back on what I've been through and what I put my kids through, I often start crying. Then I look at where I am today and realize I'm blessed. Not everyone gets a second chance.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: Breaking a Painful Pattern by Milagros Sanchez

It's not easy for Milagros to break the cycle of abuse and silence in her family. But she takes many concrete steps to create a home that is the opposite of the one she grew up in: one where there is honesty, openness, safety, trust and love. Her steps include being open about her mistakes and answering her children's questions honestly; establishing fun routines and activities with them; finding ways to calm herself down when things get stressful; and committing to talking through problems with her children.

Write in your journal (or below) about the kinds of changes you would like to make in your own family, and the steps you can take.

1. What kind of a home would you like to create with your children when they return?

2. How is it different from the home you grew up in or the home you had with your children before foster care?

3. What do you think will be challenging about making those changes?

4. What are your strengths as a parent? How will your strengths help you deal with those challenges?

ACTION STEPS

Write down 2-3 new activities or routines you would like to start with your children, to help build the kind of relationships you'd like to have with them.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:



www.risemagazine.org

LEADER'S GUIDE:

Breaking the Chain by Evelyn Salazar
Building a calm, safe home for my son.

DISCUSSION FOCUS: Connecting through play

ACTIVITY GOAL:
Participants will recognize the activities and games that they enjoy doing with their children.

STORY SUMMARY

Evelyn's son, Dylan, has a strong personality, like his mother. Sometimes he delights Evelyn with his thoughtfulness and curiosity. Other times he overwhelms her with his demands and temper tantrums.

Evelyn shows how playing with her son has brought them closer and helped Dylan to grow. She also shows how she tries to be firm when he has tantrums, encouraging him to use words to express how he feels instead of actions.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about the importance of playing. It's important that your child has plenty of time to play with friends, play alone, and play with you. Play helps children learn how to get along with others and negotiate. It improves their ability to use words (instead of negative behavior) to express themselves. Playing with your child can also help you have a closer relationship with your child – good times that balance out the times when you make demands on your child or you must be apart.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Evelyn describes different ways of playing and interacting with her son: Answering his questions, playing pretend, reading stories.	What games or activities do your children like to play with you?
Dylan learns to express his thoughts and feelings with words by playing at having a conversation.	What do you think your children learn by playing?
Playing together is helping Dylan learn to better tolerate frustration, like the frustration he feels when he loses a game.	How do you think play can help your children learn to handle frustration?
At times, Evelyn feels open to playing and at other times she is tired, busy or does not want to play.	How do you respond most times that your children want to play?
Evelyn says that playing together has brought her and Dylan closer: "I pay more attention to him and he does the same to me."	How do you see your relationship with your child being affected when you and your child play together, or when you don't have time to play as much?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their experiences and the steps they can take to strengthen themselves and their families. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants 15-30 minutes to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a counselor, therapist, or peer.

Breaking the Chain

Building a calm, safe home for my son.

By Evelyn Salazar

Translated from Spanish.

When my son Dylan was 2, his father and I separated. I had to confront the reality that we weren't coming together as parents, but instead were arguing and screaming at each other. At times he would even shove me or grab me by the arm.

It was very hard to make a decision to leave. I knew it would be sad for Dylan not to live with his father. But I also didn't want him to grow up watching us fight. I thought, "Is this the example I want to give him?"

Finding Support

I found a therapist, hoping she could help keep Dylan's father and me together, or help us communicate if we split up. But he wouldn't go.

After we split up, I decided to keep going to the therapist, Liza, at the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park. I knew that it would help me to get someone's support and have a place where I could unburden myself at a time when I was

feeling so alone.

At that time, Dylan spoke only a little. He was very restless and seemed frustrated, I think because he wanted to express something that he couldn't say, or because it was hard for me to know what he wanted.

Liza suggested he go to a special school where he could get help with controlling his restlessness and anger, as well as other things he didn't feel comfortable doing, like painting and playing with sticky things (because he didn't like to get himself dirty or wet).

Really, I didn't think it was a big problem, but in the few months Dylan went to the school – Wow! I noticed that he was no longer so restless and didn't get angry over every little thing, and I could see his curiosity growing. He was maturing. It was very satisfying to see how he learned and grew.

Now Dylan is 4 years old, and he has distinguished himself as a very curious and playful

child who likes to be amused and to get a lot of attention. He has a great imagination and is also very intelligent – he took that from me, ha ha ha.

Tender Moments

Sometimes Dylan is so tender, like when he comes home after being with his father. He opens the door and says, “Mami, I have a surprise for you! Close your eyes!”

When I open them he says, “I have a rose for you, the prettiest mother in the world, so you’ll never be sad.”

This fills me with tears and I throw myself down in front of his little body. (Other times, he says that he’s my surprise!)

Sometimes Dylan asks me questions that I don’t know the answers to, and couldn’t imagine existed in his little head. He asks me what he was like when he was a baby, what it was like when he was in my stomach, how he was born, what his body was like then, what he could do and what he couldn’t do.

He also asks things like, “Why do the leaves fall from the trees? Why is it cloudy?” Wow! I have to turn into a meteorologist to give him a satisfying answer.

Being Playful

Dylan especially likes to play pretend. He says to me, “Mami, we’re going to play that you’re Dora and I’m Boots, OK?”

“OK.”

“Hello, Dora.”

“Hello, Boots.”

“What are you doing, Dora?”

“Nothing, Boots. I am walking home. And you, Boots?”

“Me too, Dora,” and we go from there.

The funniest is when he says to me, “Mami, we’re going have a conversation, OK?”

“Have a conversation about what?”

“About you, about me, everything, Mommy. Everything, OK?”

“OK.”

“Start, Mami.”

“You start!” and then we start to chat about whatever thing.

Putting Him First

At times things aren’t easy because I’m tired and he wants to play. I say, “Play by yourself and later I’ll play with you,” but hardly five minutes will go by before he comes back to me.

Sometimes at night I want to go directly to bed but I have to put him to bed first, reading him a story and the whole procedure before he’ll go to sleep. There are times when I’m reading his story and I fall asleep and he nudges me, saying, “Mami, wake up! Mami, don’t sleep!”

I try to skip pages so we can get through it more quickly, but he’ll catch me and say, “Oh, no, Mami, that’s not how it goes, this is how...” and make me go back.

Dealing With Tantrums

Dylan also has a very strong character, like his

father and me. If he doesn't get a lot of attention, he gets angry. When things don't go his way, he can throw tremendous tantrums. He cries furiously and has a very strong voice, so over his crying you can hear him screaming and screaming, and sometimes knocking things down. It's overwhelming.

I don't always know what reaction to have. It used to be that one of us would shout, and the other would shout back, and then we'd keep shouting, like a chain. I know now that I have to break that chain.

It's not easy. At times I feel a sense of desperation, but I try to keep communication going. I say, "Dylan, if you don't scream, I can understand you better. I know you're mad, but let's calmly try to resolve this situation."

When he has a tantrum in public, I just try not to feel ashamed if he makes a scene. I talk to him, or I fill myself with strength and count, "Two, three, four" minutes until he calms down.

I Try to Be Firm

I know that he needs to learn that when his mother says no, she means it. I don't want him thinking, "Oh, Mami says that but she'll change her mind." Although it's difficult to not give in to him, and to not be able to give him everything he wants, I try not to give in to his demands too much.

Sometimes when we're playing a game and I win, he gets mad and messes up the game, or he wants to play it again so he can win. If I won't play again, he cries and screams.

I try to be firm and to speak clearly, without starting to scream myself, saying, "Dylan, look at me, listen to me. I know you wanted to win,

but one person can't always win. There's going to be times when it's your turn to lose. It's not a problem. You don't have to get angry."

Sometimes he keeps crying and I leave him. I say, "When you feel better, you tell me what you want." That works well. I don't give a lot of attention to his tantrum, and he calms down and talks to me.

A Stable Home

In the past two years, Dylan and I have learned a lot together. I pay more attention to him, and he does the same to me.

Although we don't live with his father, he sees him two days each week and every other weekend. Dylan has told me that he would like for all three of us to be together. I had to explain to him, "Papi has his house, and Mami has her own. But the important thing is that although we're separate, we're content."

Now Dylan has security and stability at home. When his father and I were together we had an unstable relationship, with one person running one way and the other running in the opposite direction. I think Dylan saw that and didn't know what to think, or just got sad seeing his parents disoriented and upset.

Dylan's father is a friend to me now. We're both striving to stay calm and do the best for our child.

My Great Satisfaction

Becoming a mother has given me more responsibility and I have matured. I've had to analyze who I am and how to get the results that I want for myself and my son.

If I get mad or frustrated, I try to understand

why I'm reacting that way and to ask myself, "What's the best way I can handle this situation?" In the past I responded like a lion, or I just wanted to run away. Now I respond like a cat, and I stay and find a solution.

It's a great feeling of satisfaction to look at my son and see him growing. When he achieves something, I know that I am a big part of that. That's fantastic! I let myself heave a great sigh, a great love from very deep down in my heart.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: Breaking the Chain by Evelyn Salazar

Evelyn sees that the games she plays with her son are helping him use words to express his feelings, handle negative feelings like frustration, and express his thoughts through imaginary play.

Take some time to reflect on what your children can learn and express through play and how you can bring more playtime into your lives. Use the questions below to guide your reflections.

1. What games and activities do you enjoy playing with your child—or might you enjoy?

2. How do you feel when you're playing together?

3. What concerns do you have about the way your child plays?

4. What gets in the way of enjoying playtime with your children?

ACTION STEPS

Setting aside time to play with your child and creating an area at home where your child can play freely can help your child handle stress and develop and grow. Write 2-3 steps you could take to bring more playtime into your lives.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:



www.risemagazine.org

LEADER'S GUIDE:

Baby Steps by Sylvia Perez

I had to get to know my daughter again when she came home.

DISCUSSION FOCUS:

Handling limit testing

ACTIVITY GOAL:

Participants will identify acting out behavior they may see in their children after reunification, as well as strategies and supports they can use to handle the testing period.

STORY SUMMARY

Visits were smooth, but when Sylvia's daughter, Lydia, comes home, her temper tantrums overwhelm Sylvia. Sylvia is afraid that her hard work was for nothing and that her daughter doesn't love her. Despite her anger and fear, Sylvia learns how to handle Lydia's behavior by seeking support from her husband and a family therapist, remembering lessons she learned in parenting classes, and savoring the positive moments she has with her daughter.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about some of the behaviors you can expect from your child in the months after she returns home. While children are in foster care, and during the "honeymoon" period soon after they return home, they may not want to upset their parents or risk returning to care by acting out. But children often come home feeling angry and insecure, and they also have trouble adjusting to family routines and expectations that feel unfamiliar to them. Parents who no longer use drugs often have very different rules and expectations, as well. You can expect that your children will test your commitment to them—and behave badly because of confusion about your new expectations—after reunification.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer’s emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they’ve handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Sylvia’s family therapist tells her it will take time for all of them to adjust.	What changes will you and your children have to adjust to when they come home?
Sylvia is now very different—more loving and more consistent—than she was toward her daughter while using drugs.	How have you changed as a parent since your children were living with you?
Sylvia remembers a tool she learned in parenting class and makes a chart to help Lydia understand what’s expected of her and achieve rewards.	How can you help your children adjust to your new expectations?
Sylvia creates routines—regular meals, baths, playtime and time getting ready for school—to help Lydia feel secure.	How can you help your children adjust to being home again?
Sylvia says sober parenting is 100% better than taking care of her daughter while getting high.	What positive connections do you look forward to sharing with your children when they come home?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their experiences and the steps they can take to strengthen themselves and their families. Hand out the “Journal Reflections” worksheet and give participants 15-30 minutes to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a counselor, therapist, or peer.

Baby Steps

I had to get to know my daughter again when she came home.

By Sylvia Perez

Translated from Spanish

When my daughter, Lydia, 5, came home after two and a half years in foster care, it was so different from having her home only on the weekends. The best part was that we didn't have to rush spending time together, or deal with having to say goodbye on Sundays. She always used to say, "Mom, I don't want to go the other house. When am I going to come home forever?" It felt good not to have to tell her, "When the judge says it's time."

But for the first couple weeks she was giving me a really hard time. She didn't want to brush her teeth or wash her hair. She totally refused to pick up her toys. I had to yell at her to do these little things, or tell her, "Go to your room." This little angel had a bad side I'd never seen.

'Does She Hate Me?'

One day she got mad at me because I was yelling at her to do her chores. She started throwing toys at me. I didn't want to spank her, so I told my husband, Hector, to come and get her. His

voice is so harsh and deep that he scared her into her room.

Then she started slamming her bedroom door. I was so pissed off that this little girl would challenge me that way. All I wanted to do was grab her by the arm and start spanking her. But I fear that if I discipline Little Mama by spanking her I will truly hurt her, and I really don't want to hurt her and make her scared of me. Even when I yell at her angrily she starts crying.

To keep myself from hurting her, I sat on the couch in my living room and just cried. I really cried hard, thinking, "All I wanted her to do was pick up her toys," and, "Does she really hate me so much to throw her toys at me? I worked so hard for her."

My husband went to her room and told her, "You see, Lydia. You made your mom cry. You have to respect your mom."

I took a deep breath and waited for her response. Our house was silent for that moment.

Then I heard her little feet coming into the living room. She came in silently, like she was scared of me, and I felt afraid of myself, that I had frightened her so much just with my words.

‘Mommy? Mommy?’

Little Mama has long black hair and big, dark eyes. She looked up at me and said, in her tiny, squeaky little voice, “Mommy? Mommy?”

Her shoulders were down and her tummy was sunk as she approached, disguised as a little angel. I asked her, “Lydia, do you not understand why I’m upset?”

Then she started crying and hugging me. “Mommy, I need help picking up my toys,” she said. At that moment, I stopped feeling so angry and just wanted to understand her and find out why she got out of control like that.

I told her, “You need to stop slamming the door, and never, ever throw things at me again.”

The Chore Chart

She’s never thrown anything since then. But our arguments scared me. I love her so much. I don’t want these little things to turn into a fight.

We’ve been going to family therapy every week since she came home. So I discussed it with the therapist. He told us to make it little steps with her, and that all of us—me, Hector and Little Mama—are going through changes. He said it will take time for Lydia to adjust to our home and our different rules and schedules.

After that, I remembered something I learned in parenting class. The teacher said to make a chart of household chores. I decided to make one together with Lydia, and to give her a small allowance for each chore.

Counting to 10

We got some papers and markers to start. I put on one paper how much she could earn for each thing, like she gets 5 cents for feeding our pets, 10 cents to brush her teeth, 7 cents to wash her hair, and 10 cents to go to bed at 8:30 p.m. She put on the chart to dress herself for school and in her pajamas.

The chart is actually working. Getting her to do her chores is a lot easier now and she puts the money in her piggy bank.

But at times, her attitude with me still really makes me angry. If I tell her, for example, “Stop sitting on the arm of the couch!” she looks at me and rolls her eyes and says, “Mom, I’m just sitting.”

It gets tiring repeating myself. So now I’ve learned to take a deep breath and start counting to 10. I only end up at number 5 or 6. I honestly don’t know how I would handle it if I got to 10.

Enjoying the Little Things

The nicest part of our day is when I get Little Mama ready for school every day, especially doing her hair: putting the gel in, pulling it into ponytails and then braiding them.

It feels good to do her hair, because when I was on crack, I honestly didn’t care about her hygiene or how she looked. I wasn’t loving her like a real mother should. I never took her out—not to the park, or shopping. I spent my time worrying about who was going to watch her while I went outside to get money for crack.

Being a sober mom is 100 percent better. I make sure she eats well and that I have food in the house, and that she takes baths and washes her hair. I take her to the park. We play together—

hide and seek and follow the leader, and then we get an icee and sit in the grass watching soccer or baseball games.

I waited four years to be able to be a full-time mom, to love her and take care of her every day. Spending time with her, I feel proud of myself for going through drug treatment, therapy and parenting classes so I could bring her back home.

Not an Angel, But a Good Kid

My parenting has gotten a lot better in the months since Lydia first came home. We eat dinner every night now, sitting together at the table to discuss our plans for the next day. We bake cakes together, make arts and crafts projects and talk about little things she's thinking about.

I love her personality. She's very giving and caring. When she acted up, I had to realize that she's not a perfect angel, but she is a good kid.

We still have difficult moments, but I'm getting better at staying calm. I'm grateful to have my husband. Even though I take care of Lydia most of the time, he and I discuss how to handle situations with her.

Lydia's bedtime is the best time of the day for me. At about 8:30 p.m., she and I go to her room and read three fairy tales: Little Red Riding Hood, The Ugly Duckling and Cinderella. We hug and kiss and she says her prayers.

After she lies down, she always calls to her daddy for a cold cup of water. We are all together as a family when we put her to bed. When she sleeps she looks like an angel, protected by God.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: Baby Steps by Sylvia Perez

You can help your children make a smoother transition home if you understand what's going to be different for you and for them and plan for how you'll communicate your expectations and rules to them. You can also plan activities that will bring you closer.

Write about the routines you'd like to establish for yourself and your child when you reunite, or that you could do during visits.

What activities do you especially enjoy doing with your child?

How do you think your expectations of your children have changed since they were living with you?

How can you communicate those changes in a positive way? Write down exactly what you might say to your child.

What routines for morning, bedtime and meals could you set up to help your home life feel more predictable to your child?

ACTION STEPS

The first few months after your child comes home are incredibly rewarding and, at the same time, stressful. Write down 2-3 steps you could take to help you all adjust to your new home life after reunification.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:



www.risemagazine.org

LEADER'S GUIDE:

'What Can I Do?' by Latonya Baskerville
My children needed me to try new ways to parent.

DISCUSSION FOCUS:

Trying new parenting techniques

ACTIVITY GOAL:

Participants will identify new methods of responding to their children's behavior.

STORY SUMMARY

When Latonya's children came home from foster care, they were angry and running wild. Latonya did not know how to manage their behavior. She didn't want to hit her children but didn't know what to do besides yell.

Latonya thought back on parenting classes she had taken and thought about her children's needs. With her son, she set firm boundaries. With her daughter, she tried to be more nurturing. She also began to listen more to her children. Slowly, their relationships grew closer and her children's behavior improved.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about our parenting styles and the tools we use to manage children's behavior. When parents decide they don't want to discipline their children by hitting or yelling, they sometimes feel that they have no other tools. We'll share other strategies you can use. Children may act out to test you or to get your attention or love. Communicating your expectations clearly and setting firm limits can help. So can nurturing and listening.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Latonya doesn't want to hit her children or yell at them anymore.	What would you like to change about your parenting style?
Latonya feared that her son and daughter were putting themselves in danger.	What fears do you have about your children?
Latonya decided not to give her son extra attention for negative behaviors.	How do you respond to your children's negative behaviors? How do you encourage positive behavior?
While her son responded to distance, Latonya felt her daughter needed more nurturing and closeness.	How could you listen to and nurture your children?
Latonya learns that listening to her children helps them feel secure.	What do you think is the connection between feeling secure and behaving well?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

‘What Can I Do?’

My children needed me to try new ways to parent.

By Latonya Baskerville

When my children first came home from foster care, life was different for all of us. I was clean and sober, thrown into a new apartment with three little strangers. My children were 10 years, 5 years and 2 weeks old when they were removed and 12, 7 and 18 months when they were returned.

Boy did my children let me know they were mad that they had been in foster care. My son was like, “F-you” about everything. They’d say to me, “You a crackhead.” I had to stay calm. My attitude was: “Ok, I sold your video game and smoked crack with the money. We established that. It’s done. What else you got?”

When my children saw that the guilt trips they tried to run on me were not working, and that I was going to continue on with my sobriety life, they came back to me and got on board. But for real, they were going crazy for two or three years. Yes, my kids and I went through it. I just kept telling them, “I’m not giving up on you.”
Old-School Techniques

I was very confused about how to parent my

children at first. The fact is, during my children’s early years I used the parenting style I learned from family members. You know the model: beat your children if they disobey you, beat them if they talk back, beat them if they get in trouble, steal, have sex at a young age, act disrespectful. Beat them!

Don’t get me wrong, some of the old school techniques are good and important. For example: have manners, be polite, respect your elders—that’s a must. My children and grandchildren abide by these rules. But techniques like, “Children should be seen and not heard” and beating or controlling your children had to go.

I wonder where this method originated. My theory is that, for my community, it began with slavery. Parents probably figured that if they beat their own children, their masters wouldn’t, and this would save the children’s lives. The method was meant to protect children.

But beating your child doesn’t really work. It creates silent and enraged children. These children grow up to be abusive adults, rigid and

insensitive to their own children's feelings and needs.

I Needed to Change

Once I took parenting classes, I realized that the model I mimicked was not legal. If I wanted to keep my children out of foster care, I needed to change my style.

But when my teenage son started running wild, I didn't know how to respond. My son was having many problems at school, at home and in our neighborhood. He started getting high and gang banging. I thought I was going to bury my son before he was 18 years old.

I was so afraid of disciplining him the old way, but all I knew how to do was yell at him. We were arguing and cursing all the time. Our relationship was crazy.

'What Can I Do?'

Then came a knock on the door: A detective from the local precinct came at 2 a.m., holding a manila folder as thick as a cinder block. The detective had evidence that my son had been committing robberies dating back two years. My son and I sat at the kitchen table with this detective. That was the first time I saw my son smoke a cigarette. He was tight.

I looked in his face and asked him, "Did you do these robberies?"

He said, "Yes, Mommy."

"Well, then you must take ownership," I told him. We wrote a full confession and the judge sentenced him to 15 months in a group home.

I started thinking, "Really, what can I do to parent this kid?" I thought back on the parenting

and anger management classes I took when my kids were in care. I decided to create a parenting style for my son that I called, "Firm as a father, soft like a mother."

Keeping My Distance

When he got locked up, I let him do his time. I didn't run up to every visit or send packages and money. I didn't write letters or accept phone calls all the time. I was not in court for every court date. I didn't scream and beg and cry. I let him do hard time for 15 months, firm like a father.

I felt that running to his aid would enable him—it would give him extra attention for doing negative things—and I believed that would only encourage him to commit crimes again. If he got locked up, I'd come running.

When my son came home, he hugged me and kissed me. He said he had learned his lesson. I was glad I didn't cater to his nonsense and reckless choices. But once he was home, I began listening to him more, soft like a mother. I encouraged my son and held him to the standards he set for himself.

Soon my son dropped his gang activities, went back to school and got his GED. At 20, he is now a responsible father and is exploring starting his own business.

Trying Straight Talk

I faced similar challenges when my daughter was around 14 years old. My daughter was suddenly a whole new child. She began hanging with sexually experienced girls and started asking a lot of questions about boys.

I did my best to detour her from sex, but my best was not good enough. Soon I found out

that my daughter was having sex with a 17-year-old boy. I was shocked, but I knew that if I overreacted, she would not open up to me, so I tried to play it cool.

We sat down in the living room and I asked her, “Why are you dealing with older boys and having sex right now? It seems like you’re too young.” I explained that I was not trying to take away the wonderful experience of sex, but that it is a sacred act for two people who love each other, and that I worried that the sex she was having could come with painful experiences, like unwanted pregnancy and STDs.

We didn’t flip out on each other, but straight talk did not help my daughter.

Learning to Listen

She started cutting school and running away from home. It was so serious that I went to the child welfare system for help before they came to me, charging me for educational neglect because she was truant. The caseworker told me to put her in therapy and I reconnected her to our former foster care agency. But she went to three sessions and refused to go back.

Once again, I had to dig into my bag of parenting skills and find a way to reach her. I realized that my daughter didn’t need tough love, she needed nurturing, compassion, connection.

I started having girl talk with my daughter. I didn’t do much talking; I just listened openly. We even invited her runaway partners over to our house to have real heart-to-hearts. The other parents thanked me and tried the same thing.

My daughter is doing much better now. She stayed with my grandmother for two years and recently moved home again. She went back to

school and her GPA went from a 40 to an 87. She applied to a college program in her high school and was accepted. She also got a job and is now working at our local supermarket. My daughter is doing well for herself. We didn’t flip out on each other, but straight talk did not help my daughter.

No Child Is Alike

As teenagers, my children needed two different parenting styles. My son needed me to let him experience the consequences of his own mistakes. My daughter needed me to come closer. Both needed me to listen. My youngest child is 10 years old. I can’t wait to see what style will help him thrive as he grows older.

I try to use patience, open-mindedness, understanding, empathy, nurturing, respect, kindness, honesty, courage, security and discipline. To be honest, these skills came from the many classes I completed while my children were in foster care. I’m thankful that I learned these skills. It needed more tools to deal with my children.

All Children Need Kindness

I believe parents should surrender the punitive parenting styles that they suffered as children. Adults who are good providers associate brutal beatings with their success. They tell their children, “It worked for me, it will work for you.”

But we have learned that it doesn’t really work. Children need to feel safe. They need your support to get ready to be responsible.

I understand that parents need to feel respected in their homes, and that learning new parenting skills takes diligence and practice. But I like the new model and use it. My children are doing better than they were. They’re not perfect, but show me a child who is.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: 'What Can I Do?' by Latonya Baskerville

When Latonya's children came home from foster care they felt angry and were running wild. Latonya felt she did not know how to parent them, but she did not give in to feeling guilty or respond to their behavior with harsh discipline. Latonya used limit setting, straight talk, nurturing and listening. Slowly their connection improved and so did her children's behavior. Write in your journal (or below) about strategies you can use to respond to your children's needs.

1. What concerns do you have about your children's behavior?

2. How do you typically respond to negative behavior?

3. How do you typically respond to positive behavior?

4. What concerns do you have about your parenting style? What do you do well?

ACTION STEPS

Latonya says that trying new skills takes diligence and patience. List 2-3 new skills you could try or use more often.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:



www.risemagazine.org

LEADER'S GUIDE:

Making My Son Proud by Rosita Pagan
I had to prove I could be trusted.

DISCUSSION FOCUS: Regaining trust

ACTIVITY GOAL:
Participants will reflect on their relationships with their children and explore ways they can re-establish a parental role.

STORY SUMMARY

As a child, Rosita's son Louie is very attached to her. But when Rosita starts drinking and her kids go into foster care, Louie pulls away. After Rosita goes to rehab, Louie gradually lets her back into his life. He expresses his anger toward her but gives her openings to get close to him again.

As Rosita continues to do well in her life and proves that her son can trust her again, they develop a mutually supportive relationship.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we are going to talk about repairing relationships with your children, and how to re-establish trust with them after rehab and reunification. When children have seen you drunk or high, or when you have been an inconsistent parent to them because of your addiction, they lose trust that they can count on you. Placement in foster care also leaves children afraid to depend on a parent. After reunification, it is up to you to prove to your children that you will be reliable.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?



READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
When Rosita starts drinking, Louie shuts her out and focuses on school and friends to protect himself.	In what ways did your children try to cope when you were addicted?
Rosita's daughter seems ready to forgive and forget, while her son is more wary.	How might your children have different responses? Why might one be ready to reconnect while another is not?
Louie starts letting Rosita back into his life by introducing her to his friends and his girlfriend, and inviting her to his basketball game and graduation.	Can you think of any ways your children have invited you into their lives?
Rosita feels strange meeting her son's longtime girlfriend for the first time.	When have you felt shut out of your children's lives? How did you deal with it?
Knowing that her son is proud of her helps motivate Rosita to continue to improve her life.	Who is proud of you? What motivates you to stay in recovery?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their experiences and the steps they can take to strengthen themselves and their families. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants 15-30 minutes to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a counselor, therapist, or peer.

Making My Son Proud

I had to prove I could be trusted.

By Rosita Pagan

My son Louie has been a good kid ever since he was small. He rarely complained about anything. He was one of those toddlers that clings to the mother. Wherever I went he was there. Summers when I was outside playing spades, my son was curious so he kept pestering me until I taught him how to play. When we were short, my son would fill in.

As he got older, Louie loved basketball. He filled his room with posters of Michael Jordan. His dream was to become a great basketball player.

Keeping His Distance

Then, when Louie was 12, some terrible things happened in our family. We found out his younger sister was being sexually abused by her father during weekend visits. Louie became angry. He blamed me because, as he put it, I allowed the courts to give her father visitation rights.

Even therapy did not seem to help my daughter. Seeing her suffer without knowing how to help her recover, I got stressed out and began to drink.

When I began drinking, Louie kept away from me. My son shut me out so he could take care of himself. I became aware of his feelings toward me when I realized he didn't introduce me to his friends anymore. In my stupor, I felt angry at him, not sad.

My Son Stayed Focused

Louie would ignore me and go outside to play basketball with his friends. He would never invite his friends over because he didn't want them to see me drunk. He wouldn't return to the apartment unless he knew that I was passed out. He rarely spoke to me when I was awake. My son was ashamed of me and the way I was wasting my life away.

Despite everything happening at home, Louie kept himself focused. He always attended school. (Looking back I realize that school was an escape route for him.) When my children were removed and placed in foster care, Louie stayed with my sister and never gave her any trouble.

While he lived with my sister, Louie would only

come see me when I was sober. Then he would ask me, “When are you going to get your life together?” or, “When am I coming home?” I would respond with, “One of these days.” I figured I didn’t have a problem. I felt I was having fun and he wanted it to stop.

Back in His Life

Finally I went to rehab and got my act together, so Louie began to allow me back into his life. The day I came back from rehab, I saw Louie outside hanging out with some friends. As soon as he saw me, he ran to me, hugged me and introduced me to his friends. I knew right there and then that he was meeting me halfway.

Soon after that I decided that it was time for me to express my regrets to my two older children, Louie and Rosemarie. I sat with them and told them, “You know I love you all, but I was not myself while under the influence. I know I must have embarrassed you while I was drinking and you probably hate me for that. I can’t make up for the lost times but I would like a chance to make it up to you guys. I’m really sorry for what I’ve put you through and I promise I will work hard not to let alcohol come between us again.”

Rosemarie said, “Mom, I understand why you went there and I feel your pain. Let’s try to start new, O.K.?” Louie did not say much only, “Don’t let it happen again.”

Later on Louie let me know how upset he’d been with me. He came to me one day and expressed to me the anger he’d been feeling all those years. He said things like, “Now that you’re sober don’t go messing up like before. Don’t lose this apartment or the girls again.”

Meeting His Girl

Soon my son began to trust me and let me learn about his life. He had a girlfriend that he’d been dating since junior high school. I didn’t even know about her, and Anita didn’t know Louie and his sisters were in foster care.

The first time I met Anita was at a street fair. It was the Puerto Rican Day festival on 116th Street. I was talking to some friends when my son asked if I could take a walk with him. I said, “Sure.”

We went down the block and I noticed a very pretty young lady just standing there. We approached her and Louie said to me, “Mom, this is the love of my life, Anita. Anita, this is my wonderful mom.”

She hugged me and gave me a kiss. I felt weird because my son was in a serious relationship and I’d missed it. He’d already been dating Anita for two years! But when he introduced us, I knew my son was proud of me for turning my life around.

Game Day

One day Louie asked me if I could attend one of his games. I said, “Sure.”

That Friday I got all dressed up and went to see him play. My son played a good game. His school won. Afterward, he came to me all sweaty and hugged and kissed me and introduced me to some of his friends. That was a good feeling.

Then my son’s high school graduation came up. Louie’s father came from Florida to attend. His sister Rosemarie asked Louie for his basketball jersey and she took it in and made it into a short dress. All of us attended the graduation—me, my two girls, my grandson and Louie’s father.

During the ceremony they gave out trophies. The first went to the best spectator who attended all the basketball games—that was Anita. The second trophy went to the MVP and best player—Louie!

Making Him Proud

My son's determination has also inspired me. Last year I decided that I wanted to do something to better myself. Louie keeps a steady job, and I wanted to work, too.

I joined an organization that helps parents advocate for themselves in the child welfare system. Then I applied for a parent advocate position at a foster care agency. After the interview, the lady told me I was hired. I felt numb and still feel numb. But I was calm enough to tell my son about it.

I called him and told him, "I got hired!"

"I want to hear about it tonight," he said.

When he got home from work he said, "Mom, tell me what happened." I explained and he said, "I'm so proud of you," and handed me a \$50 bill!

I'm happy that I can make my son proud of me because I'm so proud of him.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: Making My Son Proud by Rosita Pagan

Rosita loses her close relationship with her son when she starts drinking and her children go into foster care. But once she takes back control of her life, her son is willing to give her another chance. Rosita apologizes, listens to her son's anger, and takes advantage of every time he offers to let her in to his life.

Write in your journal (or below) about how your relationships with your children have been affected by what you've been through, and what you can do to reconnect with them.

What was your relationship with your children like before you were addicted?

How did it change?

How have your children reacted to you since you've been in rehab?

What are some ways that your children have shown you that they want to reconnect? In what ways have they shown you they're not ready yet?

ACTION STEPS

Write down 2-3 things you could do to invite your children into your life or to respond positively to their attempts to reconnect with you.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:



www.risemagazine.org

LEADER'S GUIDE:

'It Won't Happen Again' by Youshell Williams
Regaining my faith in myself and my children's trust in me.

DISCUSSION FOCUS: Handling children's anger

ACTIVITY GOAL:
Participants will explore ways to regain the trust of children who have experienced domestic violence and foster care placement.

STORY SUMMARY

Youshell successfully leaves an abusive relationship and re-establishes a safe home for her children, but she soon becomes depressed. Eventually, her depression leads her to keep her children home from school, and she loses them to foster care. Youshell then loses confidence in herself as a parent and her children's trust that she can be counted on to take care of them.

After three years, Youshell's children come home angry and fearful. Family therapy helps Youshell reconnect with her children and reassure them.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about the difficult emotions that you and your children may feel after reunification. When children are in foster care, they and their parents feel excited about what it will be like to be together again, but reunification is also complicated. Children may feel disappointed in their parents, anxious about their future, and angry that they ended up in care. Parents may feel shaky about their parenting, especially if they are not sure how to handle unexpected anger. Because these feelings can be overwhelming and confusing, it is important to plan for how you will deal with those feelings when they arise.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Youshell feels afraid that she will fail again if she attempts to bring her children home.	When have you felt anxious to prove yourself to your children?
Youshell and her children play a game in family therapy that helps her understand their feelings.	What helps you to understand your children's feelings? What help could you use?
Playing games helps Youshell hear the fear behind her children's anger.	What fears do you believe your children may have bottled up inside them?
Youshell's persistence in listening to her children's feelings helps her rebuild their trust in her.	What further steps might you take to reassure your children that they can open up to you and depend on you?
Youshell and her children feel more relaxed and comfortable together now.	How do you think your family life could be different if your communication with your children improved?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their experiences and the steps they can take to strengthen themselves and their families. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants 15-30 minutes to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a counselor, therapist, or peer.

'It Won't Happen Again'

I regained my faith in myself and my children's trust in me.

By Youshell Williams

I'd like to share my story. It's not easy for me because I hold my privacy to me like a shield. I fear that I will be judged. But what I'm telling is from my heart.

Nine years ago, I lost my older two children to foster care. It took three years for them to come back home. We're still recovering from the pain of that time.

My story begins with my marriage, on July 31, 1989, when I was 19 years old. He was 36 and seemed older and wiser. I wanted someone to love me unconditionally, someone who would appreciate my love. My father was abusive, my mother had died, and I felt lost.

He was my first abuser. I already hated myself, but he made me feel like I was beyond dumb.

God blessed me with a son and a daughter. I did not know a lot about babies, but what I didn't know I lovingly learned. My husband was no help. When he wasn't calling me names, he was out in the streets getting drunk and having af-

fairs.

Letting Go of my Anchor

By early 1992 I had had enough. I let go of my anchor and sent him on his way to give other women hell. After all the chaos and embarrassment my husband had caused me, I didn't miss him.

It wasn't easy taking care of two small children alone, though. Eventually I moved, found child-care and started looking for a job with the help of America Works, a program that prepares young people for work. In 1994 I was hired on a trial basis at a cancer research firm. They liked my hard work and kept me.

Soon I was making good money and had worked my way up to lab technician. I was successful, yet I was not happy. I just did not feel right. I was short-tempered and angry and cried a lot. I didn't know what was wrong with me.

I Just Did Not Feel Right

I had wonderful support at my job. One nice

man suggested that I see a therapist. I didn't listen. I felt I was too strong for that nonsense. Yet I felt myself getting weaker and weaker and crying more and more.

Then things got worse for me at home. The Catholic school my children attended told me my son could not continue on to first grade because he didn't listen and disappeared out of class.

I switched both kids to public school, but their new school was deplorable. The teachers didn't care, and my son was often beat up by a bully with yellow eyes. I rushed to the school from work one day only to be told by the teacher that my son was "around here somewhere." Well, I found him walking down the street, away from the school. At 6 years old! I lost it. I felt my children were being treated like stupid animals, and that reminded me of the way my aunt treated me when I lived with her after my mother died.

That school also had no after-school program, and I worked until 5, so I ended up calling their father and begging for his help. He reluctantly helped out at first, but that didn't last long. He told me, "They're your problem."

Of course, I was soon having lots of problems at work. I was late almost every day, I had to leave early to pick up my children. Finally, I asked my job to lay me off.

I Broke Down

Once I stopped working, I became so depressed that some days I wouldn't bother taking my kids to school. I just wanted to keep them home with me where I knew they were safe and taken care of. I was overwhelmed and needed help.

I talked to a social worker at the school and told

her, "I can't take it anymore." She didn't ask me what I was talking about, but did take it upon herself to call the abuse hotline and report educational neglect.

An ACS caseworker began coming to my home. She had a very nasty attitude and I refused to bow down to her. Instead I responded in the same nasty way.

A worker from a family support program (called "preventive services" in New York) began visiting, too. She approached me tentatively, in a nice way, but I felt she did not know how to help me. I really did not trust preventive services or know what they were about.

Looking back, I wish I had asked more questions of the preventive worker. I wish I'd asked her to provide me with the services I needed, but I didn't even have a clue what those would be or even how I could help myself.

I Barely Kept Living

Eventually, when my son was 6 years old and my daughter was 7, I broke down. One day, after another horrible visit from the demon worker, I called her and asked her to take my children to my sister's house. I thought I was doing the right thing by placing them in foster care.

My son suffered for my mistakes. My daughter suffered for my mistakes. And I suffered, too. I feel I will never forgive myself for giving up.

After my kids went into care, I just barely kept living. The first month was terrible, because the worker put them with a stranger instead of with my sister, until a judge ordered them moved. I was so scared and angry when I didn't know where my children were.

For a short time, I was hospitalized to deal with my depression. Then I went to support programs and worked so I'd have money to give my sister for my kids. I only had two good reasons—my kids—to keep trying.

Afraid to Fail Again

My children were with my sister for three years. My sister was wonderful. She did above and beyond what a sister or aunt should do. She loved my children. She had her own son, and she treated all three like they were one big happy family.

When I visited my sister's house, I was able to witness the attention she lavished on them. Her caring for my children and me was amazing. I am truly lucky and blessed.

But the separation took its toll. As time passed I became afraid to get my children back, afraid to fail again. Seeing what my sister could provide made me fear that I would mess up my children's lives if I took them back. I lived in a dump. The apartment was nasty, the landlord was a slumlord.

My sister and her husband did not live in the ghetto. They lived in a nice neighborhood with better stores nearby, better schools, better everything. I had high hopes for my children, and still do. I wanted my children to experience the good side of life. I did not want them to become totally ghettofied.

I knew my children needed my love and my parenting, and I knew they had more in my house than I ever had growing up. But I believed my children were happy and might think, "Then Mommy came and messed everything up once again."

Life felt like one big messy hell for me. It was easier, and somehow felt right, to give up and let someone else do the work of raising them. But my heart sure felt empty.

A Wake-up Call

My sister woke me up. One day she said to me, "It doesn't seem like you want them back." My new worker helped, too. She explained what steps to take to get my children home. Without her, I believe my case could've dragged on forever.

Soon I went to court and I filed a document asking the system to release my children to me. Soon enough, my children came home.

After such a long absence, though, it took a long time for my children and me to get back in the groove. There was tension in our house. My kids acted like I was no longer the parent, Aunt Gina was. (I felt like they were thinking, 'Mommy showed how weak she could be. Now the respect was gone.')

My son was especially angry, and it was hard for me to help him. His attitude was "life sucks," and I totally agreed with him. Above all, he did not want to face the new man in my life, my future tormenter and second hell, and the new reason for ACS to return to my life years later...but that's another story.

My children definitely resented me and the slum they had come home to, and showed it in many ways: lots of arguments, disrespect and shouting that "You should have left us at Aunt Gina's!" Plus a whole lot of pretending that they did not hear me or my rules.

Tensions Running High

Thank God, about a year later we moved into a

much nicer apartment where my children each got their own rooms. The move eased the tension some, but Mommy still didn't get respect from her children.

And when my son and daughter visited Aunt Gina on the weekends, forget about it. When they came home on Sunday nights, the anger on their faces was chilling. I'd get angry, too, and just say, "Yeah, y'all home now, so go unpack and get ready for school tomorrow."

"Yeah, whatever!" they'd say, slamming their doors. Sometimes I would hear one or the other muttering to themselves, "I wish I could have stayed at Aunt Gina's!"

The Support We Needed

Luckily, I was required to go to a preventive agency when my kids returned home, and the agency we were sent to was very good.

My worker was nice and understanding. She helped me with my son by joking with him and trying to draw him out of his shell, and by going out to his school to talk with his teachers, because he was always having difficulties.

She was great, but when she left after two years, I found another agency. I loved my second worker. She started us on family therapy and I was hooked. Every week we went to her office to talk with her as a family. My favorite part was a game where we all had to say words that expressed how we were feeling at that moment, and how we felt about each other.

I found out a lot. My children were fearful and disappointed in me. I had seemed so strong to them that it had been shocking to them to watch me fall so hard. They were bitter and scared that I might fall once again. They wanted to stay with

Aunt Gina because she showed strength consistently and they could trust her.

Hearing My Children's Pain

How my children felt was very important to me, but at home all I heard was their anger. When we played the games, I was able to hear them express their fears and frustration, and what they wanted from me. I realized that my children had cause for concern, and their fear wasn't just that I would fail in the future, but that our family would not recover from the past. They were asking, "Where do we go from here?"

I was determined to put their fears to rest by telling them and showing them that Mommy would never give up on herself again. I also realized that we may not be able to get those three years, back but we can move forward and make new memories, happier memories.

Family therapy has helped. Our worker encouraged us to keep building our trust in each other. She'd say, "Change can be a good thing. It helps you grow as a family."

As my children saw my persistence in listening to them and in rebuilding our family, it was easier for them to begin to trust me. I felt better, too, as my strength and resolve returned. I told myself, "I refuse to give up again."

I Won't Give up Again

I don't know how completely my children trust me now, but we are more comfortable with each other and we have come a long way. Despite the obstacles that still insist on blocking our paths, we are struggling through together, as a family.

It would have been easy, in the face of their hostility, to just quit, throwing my hands up and say-

ing, “Y’all don’t need me.” But that wasn’t true. They needed me to be their advocate, to talk to them, and most of all, to be their caring mother.

For a long time, I didn’t think that I deserved my children, but now I know that no one else can be a better mother to them.

Now, when my children return from visiting Aunt Gina, they come home saying, “Hi, Mom.” I say, “Hello” with a smile. They’re not angry and I’m not angry. I’m happy to see them, and I see in their faces now that they are happy to be back. These days, when they go to their rooms, they no longer slam the doors.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS:

'It Won't Happen Again' by Youshell Williams

You can strengthen ties with your children after reunification if you find ways to help them express their feelings about what they've gone through and take steps to show them that they can depend on you.. Write about the steps you can take to connect with your children and reassure them.

How do your children communicate their feelings to you now?

How would you like them to express themselves? What could help you improve your communication with your childrne?

What have you done to reassure them that they'll be safe and stable at home?

What is your greatest concern about taking care of your children once they come home?

ACTION STEPS

Reunification is a wonderful experience, but it also brings up complicated emotions. Write down 2-3 steps you can take to deal with the concerns you have about reunifying. What can you do now and what can you do after they come home?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:



www.risemagazine.org

LEADER'S GUIDE:

Paying for the Past by Carmen Caban
After years in foster care, my son came home angry.
Could we be a family again?

DISCUSSION FOCUS: Handling teens' anger

ACTIVITY GOAL:
Participants will better understand the impact of placement and how to respond to children who are angry after reunification.

STORY SUMMARY

When Carmen's son Luis is 15 he returns home after eight years in foster care. They are eager to reunite, but it soon becomes clear that Luis is still very angry. Unable to control him, and unsure of what to do, Carmen tells a caseworker about their problems and Luis ends up back in care.

Eventually Luis returns home, and their relationship begins to improve. Still, Carmen realizes that they have a long way to go to heal from the past.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we are going to talk about preparing for reunification by understanding the anger or other emotions your children may feel when they return home. After coming home, children may still be struggling with the pain of being in foster care. They may express that pain through angry outbursts, risky behavior, or in other unexpected ways. We'll talk about how to recognize the feelings behind your children's behavior and how to handle it.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?



READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
When Carmen's son is angry and resistant with her, Carmen feels angry, guilty and trapped.	Have there been times when you felt your children were not accepting you as a parent? How did you feel?
Underneath his anger and rebelliousness, Luis feels unsure about his mother's love.	How do you find out what your children are feeling? What clues do they give you?
Carmen worries about her son but is unable to express her feelings.	How do you let your children know how you feel? What are some things that have been hard to express to them?
By refusing to terminate her parental rights, Carmen shows her son that she won't give up on him.	What are some things you do to show your children that you will not give up on them?
Carmen realizes that she and her son need to get to know each other again.	How are you different than you were before your kids went into care? How do you think they are different?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their experiences and the steps they can take to strengthen themselves and their families. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants 15-30 minutes to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a counselor, therapist, or peer.

Paying for the Past

After years in foster care, my son came home angry. Could we be a family again?

By Carmen Lydia Caban

On December 8, 2000, my 15-year-old son was discharged into my custody after spending a long time in a residential treatment center. I thought everything would be good. I had wanted him to come home for so long. But his anger soon overwhelmed me.

My children were taken from me when my son was 5, because of my drug addiction. In foster care, Luis' anger just grew and grew. He was angry at the system because he was separated from me and from his siblings. And he was angry at me because he depended on me and I let him down.

I said I would never be like my own mother, who'd neglected her children out of frustration with my father, an alcoholic. But trying to hide the scars of my past, I slipped and allowed myself to fall deep into a life of drug abuse, which in turn hurt my children.
Ready to Come Home

While in care my son was fighting and threatening kids because that anger kept growing. But at

13 he began to calm down because I was finally succeeding in conquering my drug addiction. He realized that if his behavior improved, he might have a chance of coming home.

He started following the rules at school and he and I attended family therapy, too. His anger was the topic we discussed most of the time.

For the first few months that my son was home, everything did seem OK. But then, suddenly, Luis became very rebellious. He felt he could stay home, not attend school and smoke marijuana. And his anger was explosive. He would push holes in the wall and destroy property in my home. Even when he stayed to himself, I could feel that he was about to explode.

When I tried to tell Luis that he couldn't keep behaving this way, he didn't listen. Maybe he thought he had come home to the same old mother he knew before he was taken from me, the mother who got high and allowed him to do whatever he wished.

I Felt Devastated

As our home became crazier and crazier, with yelling and even some physical fights, I began to feel very guilty and very angry at my son for not letting me be a parent to him. I felt devastated.

My main concern was that my boy was riding on a path to devastation. I wanted to tell him about the many times I put my life in danger as a teen just to get back at my own mother.

I was angry at her and I wanted her to feel pain, and the only way I knew how to do that was to make myself suffer. So I stepped into the streets to see all that life had to offer and got caught up with some wild kids who were dangerously violent at the sound of a heartbeat. I didn't want my son to suffer like I did because he couldn't deal with his anger at me.

But he wasn't going to hear a lecture from me.
Time for Tough Love

Eventually my son's rebellion had me so overwhelmed that I thought the system might be the only answer. I was afraid he would think I was giving up all hope in him, so I didn't ask for my son to go back into care, but I did tell the caseworker honestly about the problems we'd been having.

Eventually the authorities came on their own to pick him up because of his failure to attend school.

As he walked out the door, I held back painful tears and sorrow. I stopped Luis as the worker was taking him and said, "Luis, I love you and I'm just trying not to allow the streets to take control of my son the way it took control of Mommy."

As I watched out the window, I thought he might glance at me but he didn't. I understood. What was happening to him was his worst nightmare. It was mine, too. It felt like my past was repeating itself and I was losing one of my babies to the system once again. I just hoped that one day he would forgive me.

'Mom, Do You Love Me?'

Then one day, after Luis had been in care a few months, the social worker called. My son had gone AWOL. I felt heart-broken. I felt like I was losing my son more and more.

A short time later, though, he showed up at my house. I kept trying to talk some sense into his young mind. Finally he said, "Mom, I respect what you are saying, but I still will not be returning to the system. I am going to take care of myself."

A month and a half went by without a word from my son. Then one cold night he appeared at my friend's house. I saw my son dragging his body up the stairs. He was so exhausted he seemed intoxicated.

The feelings that came over me made me stand still, numb, not knowing what to say to him. I just stared and had a flashback of my own life as a young girl in the streets.

My son said to me with a staggering voice, "Mom, I love you, I miss you. Do you love me? What did I do wrong?" He kept repeating these words over and over again.

Then he said, "Can I have a hug?" I held him close to my body and embraced him as I cried silently, holding back tears.

I wanted to help my son, but I didn't want to

take him back without any promises that he'd change. So I asked Luis to come upstairs and I asked my friend, "Please talk to my son, I cannot stay. I have to go."

'I Have Faith in You'

About a week later, I received a call from the preventive worker that my son had requested a meeting. When I arrived, he said to the worker, "I want my mother to give up all her rights to being my mother." Then he turned to me and said, "So what will it be?"

I replied, "My son, my rights will terminate the day I die. Until then you are stuck with me." After that, he stormed out of the office.

A couple of months later he had a court date scheduled. I did not expect him to show up, but then I heard him whisper behind me, "Mom, is it over? What did the judge say?" I looked back at him and he looked frightened.

The worker turned to me and said, "Remember, be calm. Tell him how you feel and what you would like from him. I have faith in you."

Making it Work

I asked Luis if he wanted to walk alongside me to Chinatown. He agreed.

At first he only said a few words here and there, but after a while he broke down and told me what he was up to and of course it was no good. The most painful piece was when he confessed he was sleeping on the train, with no place to go and no one to turn to, just the negative associates he met along the way.

This time around, I decided, my son and I were going to make it work, even if I died trying.

He came home soon after, on March 4, 2002. For the moment, our relationship is better and so is his behavior. Every night when he comes home we talk about how his day went. He says he's working helping out a friend with cars or distributing fliers.

I'm not sure I always believe him. He might be, but he also might just be playing around with his time. Still, we've made an appointment for him to start a program to get his GED and to get drug counseling, and I hope that will give him some structure in his life.

In the past, when he left his stuff around the house, I'd get mad, but now I've learned not to be bothered. When he breaks other rules, like coming home late or smoking pot, we talk about it and usually he apologizes.

Hurts Take Time to Heal

After doing some soul-searching, I've also had to realize that there's a huge gap in our relationship created by those eight years that my son was in foster care. When parents and children are reunited, both sides have to face more than they bargained for.

As parents, we have to deal with our children being angry at us for failing to be someone they could always rely on. Those feelings do not go away easily. And we also have to deal with the anger we sometimes feel toward our children, even though we don't want to be angry at them.

Living with my son is like starting all over again. Luis has had to get to know me and I've had to get to know him.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: Paying for the Past by Carmen Caban

When Carmen's son comes home, she is overwhelmed by the anger he expresses. You can help prepare yourself for reunification by thinking about how your children might be feeling after they return home, and some ways you could handle it. Write in your journal (or below) about the following questions.

1. Think about a time when your children were angry at you, or acted defiant or rejecting. How did you feel? Write down whatever words come to mind.

2. How did you handle that conflict? What did you do that was helpful, and what was not helpful?

3. What emotions do you think your children may have after being in foster care? How do you think they might express them?

4. What are your hopes and fears about how you might react? What resources do you have that could help you respond the way you'd like to?

ACTION STEPS

It's hard to predict exactly how you children will feel or react when they come home. But establishing a trusting and open relationship with them can help. Write down 2-3 steps you could take now to help you and your children communicate better.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:



www.risemagazine.org

LEADER'S GUIDE:

Bonded for Life by Robin Wiley
My son and I developed a bond years after he came home.

DISCUSSION FOCUS:

Repairing a relationship in family therapy

ACTIVITY GOAL:

Participants will understand the impact of their parenting style on their children and think about new ways to relate.

STORY SUMMARY

Robin's son Caiseem goes into foster care as soon as he is born, and they are never able to establish a bond. After he comes home, she still feels that they are disconnected, and doesn't know what to do about his behavior problems. Finally, she decides they should go to family counseling together.

In counseling, they learn to listen to each other and get a better understanding of why the other person acts the way they do. They practice new ways of relating to one another, and begin to develop real closeness.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we are going to talk about how we relate to our children. Often we're puzzled or frustrated by the way our children respond to us, and we don't realize how our own behaviors affect them. If you can step back and listen to your child, you can better understand how you and your children relate to each other and use that understanding to reduce frustration and strengthen your bond. Family counseling or feedback from friends or family members can help you step back.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?



READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Robin is unable to bond with Caiseem as a baby.	When your children were babies, what things helped you feel close to them, or prevented you from feeling close?
Robin learns that counseling is "mostly about listening to yourself" and getting a new perspective.	When you're struggling with something, what helps you get a new perspective on it?
Robin chooses family counseling over sending her son to individual counseling.	Have you or your child been to individual counseling? What makes family counseling different? Do you think family counseling could be helpful for your family?
Robin and Caiseem are both embarrassed when the other points out their bad behavior in therapy	What concerns would you have about talking through problems with your children or hearing their feedback about your parenting?
The therapist gives Robin and her son strategies to cut down on her yelling and his lying.	How does having (or not having) a close and trusting relationship affect children's behavior?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their experiences and the steps they can take to strengthen themselves and their families. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants 15-30 minutes to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a counselor, therapist, or peer.

Bonded for Life

My son and I didn't develop a bond until years after he came home.

By Robin Wiley

Twelve years ago, when my son Caiseem was 5, he came home from foster care, where he had been since birth. Caiseem is the youngest of my four children. I've always felt a strong connection with each one of my children, but with Caiseem, something was missing.

Pieces Missing

While he was in care, I would visit Caiseem at the agency, and during those visits I could feel that something wasn't right. I felt that there was a wall between my baby and me. But I would put that feeling to the side and just try to be happy to see my baby.

Caiseem was a big old bundle of joy, especially when his father would pick him up. Then he would smile from ear to ear. But from the beginning, I didn't feel like I got a positive response from him when I would pick him up. Instead, I felt like he was looking around for his father. Separated at Birth

I wondered if Caiseem understood somehow that, when I was pregnant with him, I didn't want

him. During my pregnancy, I hoped God would take him away because I didn't want to bring him into this world while I was using crack and homeless.

I asked God to forgive me for my negative thoughts, but I feared that Caiseem always felt unloved and unwanted, no matter how I tried to love him.

Looking back, I think I felt rejected by my son because I felt so guilty, and that there was a wall between us because he went into foster care right from the hospital, before we had time to connect.

How Can We Bond?

In the years after he came home, it always felt like Caiseem and I were not connecting. I constantly wondered what I could do to create a bond with my son. I knew I needed to reach him, because he was going through many issues at school and at home.

Caiseem would not talk much. He would stay

out past curfew. He would steal. When questioned, he would lie. He would even steal from his brother and lie about it, or steal in school. I would make him give his allowance to pay for what he stole, but discipline didn't solve the problem.

Finally, when Caiseem was 12, I thought, "He needs counseling." Then I corrected myself: "No, we need counseling." We needed someone to help us understand what the problem was.

I had been to counseling myself, not long after my children came home, because I was really stressed about taking care of my children and needed someone to talk to. My counselor helped me a lot. With her, I realized that counseling is mostly about listening to yourself and having someone whose responses can help you think from a new perspective. That counselor helped me hear myself.

'We Need Counseling'

This time I went with Caiseem. We were introduced to a really smart and understanding therapist at the Northside Center for Child Development in New York City. At first I wasn't sure she could help us because she was younger than me and didn't have children, but she really helped to bring us together.

Caiseem and I were very nervous at our first session. But after Ms. Gamble introduced herself, we started to relax. She had such a soft and comforting voice—you know, the kind that makes you feel like she cares.

Ms. Gamble told us that we would talk to her together. Other times, we would take turns talking with her separately, and then we would talk together about some of what we'd discussed.

Homework and Games

Ms. Gamble gave us homework and games to help us open up and try new ways of relating.

During one of our sessions, Caiseem seemed embarrassed when I mentioned his lying and stealing. I felt the same way when he said, "Mom's always yelling about stuff." I knew I yelled but I didn't understand the way it sounded to him.

Ms. Gamble gave us an assignment to do at home. Caiseem was to ask for what he wanted instead of stealing, and I was to congratulate Caiseem on his good work.

As for me, I was to talk instead of yelling, and when I did yell, Caiseem was to say, "Mom, do you know you're yelling?" Then I should stop and count slowly from 10 backwards to one.

Sometimes I would apologize. Other times I found myself saying, "Yeah, I know I'm yelling, and that's because I have to keep repeating myself." We discussed this in the next session.

Hearing Ourselves

Other times we played a game where I would be Caiseem and he would be me.

Playing Caiseem, I would say things like, "Ma, can I go outside?"

"Go outside for what?" he'd say. I began to think, "Every time I ask for something, he's yelling." I really started feeling sad.

Other times, Caiseem, acting as me, would ask me if I took something. Caiseem has this puppy dog look he gives where he looks real cute. I'd give him that sad look and I wouldn't say anything.

“Mommy, why you not answering me?” he’d ask, getting frustrated.

“Cause I’m being you, and that’s what you do!” I said.

Caiseem was always afraid to ask for what he wanted, because I might say no. But a little while after that, he did stop stealing.

‘Ma! Ma!’

Those experiences really helped Caiseem and me understand each other’s perspectives and change our behaviors. But most of all, going to therapy together brought us closer.

I’ve noticed a big change in my son. Before he wouldn’t talk to me, but now he is eager to share and connect.

Some days after school, Caiseem will rush into my bedroom all excited and say, “Ma, you know what happened today? At school?”

Happy and Connected

I remember one time when I did not feel like talking with him. I was thinking, “Oh, no, Caiseem, I’m tired.”

I said to him, “Not now, I’m watching my show.”

Then he grabbed the remote and pressed pause, lying on the bed with his head on my shoulder, telling me about his incident at school, like a little boy.

I noticed that his hair was really fresh smelling, like the apple shampoo he uses, and as I listened and talked with him, I felt so happy and connected to my son. I can actually say we have bonded.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: Bonded for Life by Robin Wiley

Through talking and role playing in family counseling, Robin learns how her behaviors affect her son and starts to understand his behavior. They both learn and practice strategies for cutting down on upsetting behavior and being more open with each other.

Write in your journal (or below) about how you and your children relate to each other, and what you could do to strengthen your connection.

1. If your child was pretending to be you, what would he or she do?

2. What would you like your children to understand about how you act toward them?

3. If you were pretending to be your child, how would you act?

4. What would you like to understand about the ways your children act toward you?

ACTION STEPS

Family counseling is helpful to Robin because it shows her ways to connect to her son. Write down 2-3 things you could do with your children to create better communication and closeness.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:
