

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with New York City's child welfare system (ACS). Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 1, SUMMER 2005

BY AND FOR
NEW YORK CITY
PARENTS

Staying Connected When Your Child Is In Care

This issue is all about staying connected to your children while they're in foster care. It hurts to be able to spend only a few hours each week with your children. Saying goodbye is always tough.

In their own words, parents who have been there explain how they advocated for the visits they needed and made the best of the time they had with their children.



ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH DEEGAN

IN THIS ISSUE

3 GETTING THE VISITS YOU NEED

Find out what legal rights you have to visit your children.

4 DOING WHAT IT TAKES

Doing homework, playing in the park and riding the train all helped Kevin Edwards and his son stay strong.

6 A TIME TO BOND

Parent Advocate Jacqueline Israel (whose kids were in care for six years) gives advice about how to make the most of visits with your children.

7 FIGHTING FOR CLOSENESS

Chris Brooks came into care because he and his mom were fighting so much. But he misses her, and wants desperately to go back home.

8 TOUGH QUESTIONS

Milagros Sanchez holds family conferences on Friday nights so her boys can ask her anything they want to know about their past.



True Stories by Teens

Winning Him Back

My visits proved I was worth my son's trust.

BY LYNNE MILLER

My baby's father passed away when I was pregnant. After, I felt I had to block out everything I was feeling so I wouldn't lose the baby. But I found out later that those feelings were still with me.

For three years, life was pretty uneventful for my son and me. We went to the park to feed the squirrels. We watched Sesame Street and Barney together. He would help me make dinner and we'd eat it together. We spent a lot of time just the two of us.

Black Hole Inside Me

Then my mother died and a black hole opened up inside me. All the feelings I'd held back for so long came rushing back. I didn't want to feel those feelings so I started snorting cocaine and smoking crack, too.

Soon, my son and I were spending a lot less time together. I'd

send him to his room by himself to watch TV for hours. He'd even eat in front of the television by himself.

The next year, ACS took him away from me. I never thought I'd get him back. My ACS worker told me that she would make sure the foster parents he was with would adopt him right out of my life. She said there wasn't a thing I could do about it—and I believed her!

I felt like my world had ended.

'Is This My Son?'

The first time I was able to see my son was about six weeks after they took him. When the agency sent me a letter to let me know where my son was living, I was overjoyed—and scared. I didn't know what to expect or how to act.

I was a nervous wreck on the bus ride to go see him. And when he arrived at the agency where I was impatiently waiting, I didn't recognize him. When they took him from me, he had a long tail and hair to just above his collar. Now his hair was shaved in sort of a mushroom cut.

When I was told, "There's your son," I think I went into shock, and my son and I spent nearly the whole visit crying all over each other.

Maybe it was the guilt I was feeling, but I felt I could see the mistrust in my son's eyes. I didn't know how I would be able to win back the trust I had stupidly forfeited.

He Called Someone Else 'Mom'

The worst part of the visit was when I heard him call the foster

mother "mom." I flipped out. After the worker and foster mom calmed me down, they explained to me that it was to make him feel at ease, and because her other foster kids called her that too.

They tried to reassure me that I still was and would always be his mom. But here was my son calling some other lady "Mom." I felt sure this was just another proof that my ACS worker was making good her threat to keep my child from me. Then she told me it would be two weeks before I would be able to see my son again, and that would be only for one hour. I was devastated. I left there in a daze.

But shortly after that I began coming to a focus group for biological parents to ask questions and get information. I ended up helping to organize their Birth Parent Advocates Program. That support helped me manage the hard times.

His Foster Mom Supported Me

Plus, I came to know my son's foster mother and she made our visits go easier and helped me get my son back. My agency, Seamen's Society for Children and Families, has a family to family approach—that is, we try to keep open communication between the birth and foster parents so that a friendship can develop.

This lets the children know they aren't a prize being competed for; they are loved and cared for and have just acquired an "extended family" to help take care of them while their birth parents are unable.

My son's foster mom would assure my son that he'd be going home someday soon. She even had the agency's psych department give my son therapy to help him with all the new and confusing feelings he was having.

Starting the Healing Process

Still, seeing my son for one hour

every two weeks took a toll on our relationship. I felt like I was in a bad dream that I was moving through in slow motion.

I no longer knew how to act or what to say around him. I tried to make it up by bringing

Having my child over night again created new tensions and stresses for both of us. He wasn't real sure how to act with me; I worried about saying the wrong thing or losing my cool.

"things" to every visit. But then I would wonder whether he was happy to see me or the gifts. The worst part was saying goodbye after every visit. That's when all the guilt and remorse really set in. I wanted to kick myself for being such a screw-up.

I think my showing up consistently for our visits started the healing process. It helped to show my son that I could be trusted again. If I told him I would be at the agency to see him in two weeks, and then I showed up, he knew I was reliable and kept my word. It also showed the agency that I was capable of being a responsible parent again.

Eventually, our visits were increased to one hour once a week, and then two hours every week. Finally, I was able to take him for an occasional overnight, then weekends.

My Son Comes Home

Having my child over night again created new tensions and stresses for both of us. He wasn't real sure how to act with me; I worried about saying the wrong thing or losing my cool. But I just took it minute by minute, and eventually we began to have a natural relationship again.

You can't know how wonderful it is to be able to just call your child in from the backyard to eat dinner until you've experienced not having him there to call. I found

most pleasure in the smallest things; wiping away a tear, kissing a booboo or just getting a hug.

The best Christmas present I've ever gotten was when I was told I could have my son for his Christmas vacation from school.

That became his trial discharge home to me. After almost 18 months of hard work, I got him back!

Ups and Downs

My son has been home almost three years. We still have our ups and downs. He still occasionally acts out in school and every once in a while he has a bad nightmare, like he did after he was taken away from me.

I am in the process of trying to find a therapist for him that I can afford. I think it's important because the feelings he experienced while I was using drugs and then when he was in foster care aren't going to disappear just because we're a family again. My son and I talk to each other about what happened and how I hope he will believe me when I tell him it will never happen again.

Parents! We need you!

If you're in preventive services, have children in care, or have gotten your children back, we're interested in your story.

Work with an editor experienced in helping parents tell their stories. Make your voice heard.

Your experiences and insights can help others.

No experience is necessary. Se habla Español.

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Getting the Visits You Need

Your rights to visiting and staying in touch with your children.

State law requires that, at minimum, you and your children have visits every other week at agency. You have a right to request more visits and better visits. You should do so by speaking to your case planner or supervisor, or at Service Plan Reviews (SPR).

The agency should consider your schedule and your children's schedule when making a visiting plan. This means scheduling visits for times when you do not have to work or do other mandated services and when your children are not in school. The agency must arrange for visits to be in a private and comfortable location. You must be given financial help, transportation, or other help necessary to ensure that you can attend visits every two weeks.

Agencies may not deny you visits with your children unless they have a court order to do so. The court can only deny visits if the visits would place your children in danger. To be absolutely clear: you cannot be denied visits because you have failed to comply with services, or some other directive of the agency. You have a right to have a hearing in court about this issue.

ACS has its own written guidelines for foster care agencies to follow. Here are the basic principles of the guidelines:

- Your visits should be unsupervised unless the agency has a reason to supervise the visits. Visits should only be supervised if necessary to protect your child, to prevent your child's court testimony from being influenced, or if a court orders the supervision. The agency can supervise some visits to assess your family interactions, but it does not have to supervise them all.

- If visits are supervised, the least amount of supervision necessary should be used. Unless your child is at serious risk of harm, the agency should not interfere with your contact with your child, even during a supervised visit.

- You should be able to visit your children during their ordinary activities, such as at hair cuts, doctor or dentist appointments, sports games, shopping, and school plays.

- The agency should help you arrange other contact with your children, including phone calls and letters between visits.

- The agency also has the authority to increase your visits or change your visits from supervised to unsupervised without ACS approval. Waiting for ACS approval



should NEVER be a reason to postpone either an increase in visits or a change to unsupervised visits.

- The agency cannot decrease your number of visits without a court order or your written consent.

- If your children are not placed in the same foster home, they have the right to visit with each other at least once every other week. The agency should also try to arrange visits with other people who are important to your children, even if those people are not relatives. Tell the agency about people you think your children would want to visit. Your children can also tell the case planner.

- Your visits should increase as you prepare for your children to return home. Visits should progress from weekly two hour visits to more frequent and longer visits, to day-long visits, to overnight and weekend visits, then to trial discharge and lastly, final discharge of your children. If the agency does not increase your visits during a six-month period, you should ask your case planner why that is.

- Your visiting plan should be reviewed at every Service Plan Review (SPR). That's an important time to ask for more visits with your children and for an explanation if the visits are not increased.

- You have the right to visit with your children even if the agency changes your children's permanency goal to adoption. You have the right to visit with your children until your parental rights are terminated. It will be very difficult, however, to have the visits increased during this time.

– From the *Survival Guide to the NYC Child Welfare System: A Workbook for Parents* by Parents

Doing What It Takes

When My son went into care, I stepped up.

BY KEVIN EDWARDS

People say there are no real men with real fatherly love for their children, or that a father can't have the same bond with his kid that a mother has. When I hear people saying that, I tell them this story about my son and me, and the best and worst days of my life.

The best day of my life was when I was 21 years old and I found out that my girl was pregnant. I especially liked how she told me. She and my sister were going back and forth to the bathroom. The last time, she came out with a pregnancy test in her hand. She gave it to me and said, "This is yours." I was excited, but I said, "How do you know this is accurate?" She had a second pregnancy test in her hand, and that was positive too. Everybody was happy, especially me.

Determined To Be A Father

But about six months after my son was born, his mother and I broke up. We'd been together for almost five years. She swore up and down that I was cheating on her, even though I was not.

My girl decided that she would take our son during the week and I'd take care of him on the weekends, which was cool for both of us. It showed me that two parents can agree on something if they really care about their child.

'Come Get Your Son'

Then, five years later, came the worst day of my life. Last April my son was placed in foster care.

One day I got a call from a hospital saying I needed to come down and get my son. Once I got there, a hospital worker told me to go to the local precinct. The precinct told me to go back to the hospital.

I started feeling that I was being played with and I got frustrated. But I stayed calm and just kept asking, "Where is my son?" Finally, I found out he had been put in foster care.

It turned out that my son was placed in care because his mom had gone to the hospital feeling sick. She passed out, and the hospital couldn't reach anyone to

I've had to make sacrifices to help my son and his mother. Certain things I used to do, like hanging out, I've cut to a minimum.

I was upset about the breakup. I wanted to stay involved in my son's life and worried that the breakup would make this difficult. My father was always there for me. Even though my parents separated and my mother remarried, he didn't stop him coming to visit my older brother and me.

pick him up because my son didn't know my phone number.

I Was Twisted

I was twisted when I found out what happened, because it took two days for the system to put me in touch with my son and because ACS wasn't returning my son to my ex. The ACS

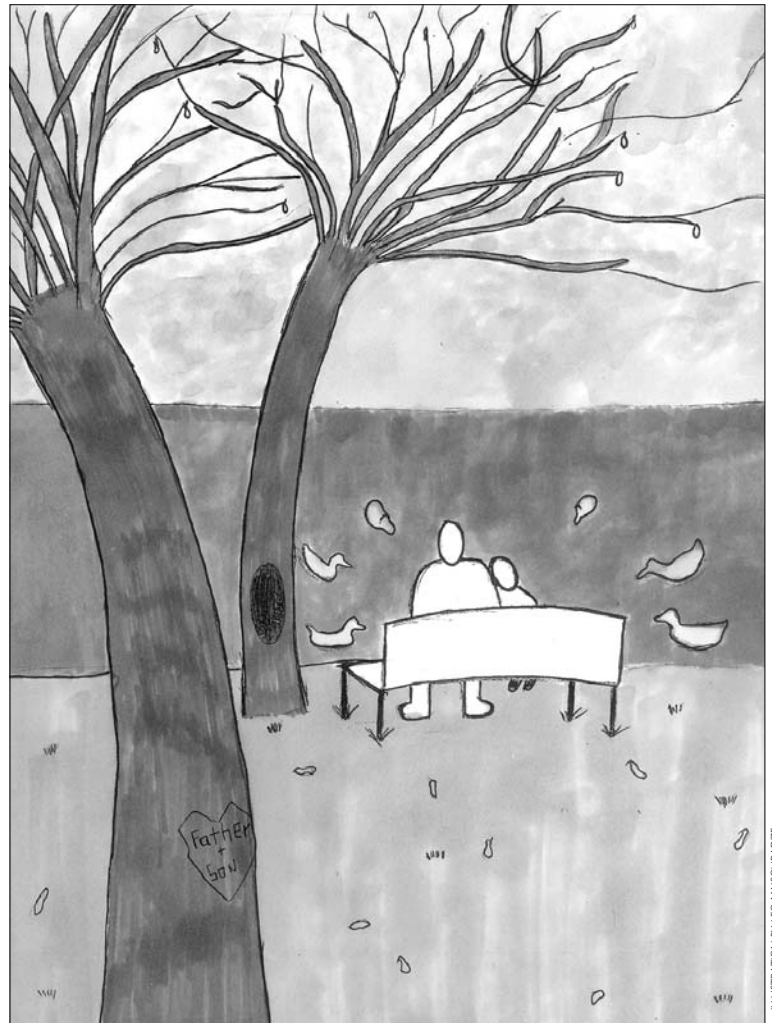


ILLUSTRATION BY LEO MASOURADZE

worker told me, "A good parent, knowing she was not feeling well, would not have brought her children to the hospital. A good parent would have made arrangements for her children to be babysat by a friend or relative." Sure, that's ideal, but sometimes you got to do what you got to do.

During those two days without my son, I couldn't sleep or eat. Not knowing what was going on was hard. My family and friends comforted me and prayed for my son's safe passage through this hell. My son's mother was equally anguished and she worried I'd be angry at her. But I wasn't. She did nothing wrong.

A Full Time-Dad

When we went to court, the judge decided to keep him in foster care instead of sending him home. That made no sense to me, and knowing how some foster parents can be, I worried that he might be mistreated in the system.

I asked the judge if I could take my son, but ACS wanted a lease showing that I lived in my own apartment. I lived with a new girlfriend and my name wasn't on the lease. They said I couldn't bring him home. Finally, they allowed my mother to take him. At least I could see him often.

That day I went to pick my son up from the agency. The first

thing he asked me was, “Why didn't you pick me up?”

I felt so bad. I told him, “I didn't know what was going on. But I never stopped looking until I found you. And I'm picking you up now.”

He stood there looking at me with a stare that his mother used to give me and said, in a nice way, “OK.” It felt good to hear him say OK. He believed me. My fear was that he'd think we abandoned him.

I Do Whatever It Takes

My son has been in foster care with my mother for a year now because his mother has to complete parenting classes and other requirements. Until she completes them, she's just another bad parent in the system's eyes.

I've helped my son by being there for him physically and mentally. I wake up at 5:30 every morning so I can go to my mom's and get him ready for school. Then I go to my part-time job and by 2:30 p.m. I'm back at his school to pick him up.

Back at my mother's house we do his homework and, if the weather permits, we go outside to a park. My favorite is Central Park because we get to feed the ducks. It's also his favorite because we take the subway.

My son loves riding the train. He likes going to the first car and watching the motorman drive to each station. He likes it so much that I got interested in trains, too, and recently took the test to drive them. Whatever it takes to ease the stress that has been placed on him, I do.

Making Sacrifices

I've had to make sacrifices to help my son and his mother. Certain things I used to do, like

hanging out, I've cut to a minimum. I ended up sacrificing my relationship with my new girlfriend as well. The time I spent taking care of my son and his mother took its toll on my relationship. So she quit me.

I would never choose anyone over my son or his mother anyway, so it didn't bother me. As a father, I had to put my son first, and if it meant losing my girl, so be it. I'm proud of the decisions I've made.

In the last few months, with the court's permission, I've started bringing my son's mother up to visit him at my mom's house. His mother also shares in day-to-day decisions that I make for him. She and I have gotten closer, too.

Finally Back Home

I'm so proud of my son because I found out that he's a survivor. The last year has probably been real traumatic for him, but he still stands strong. My son doesn't ask to go home. And after visits with his mom, he doesn't act out or do anything negative. I think that's because he understands that whether he's at his mom's or with me, he's always home. We're all family.

Soon my son will go home to his mother. That's a good thing. He misses his mom and he belongs with her. I can't wait for that moment. That definitely will be a cause for celebration.

I know that my relationship with him will be strong forever, even when I don't see him every day anymore. It's been amazing seeing how he's been growing up.

On Task

New plans to improve visits.

Center for Family Representation Deputy Director Michele Cortese is a member of ACS' Visiting Improvement Task Force. Here she explains how the system is working to provide families with better visits.

Two summers ago, an advocacy group conducted a survey about visiting. Essentially, the report said the parents have been able to visit their children more often since ACS passed HS visiting guidelines in 2000, but visits are mostly in agency visiting rooms, which aren't great for families.

We presented the report to Commissioner John Mattingly in the fall and he charged the Visiting Improvement Task Force with getting him an “action plan” within a few months. That's a plan for fixing the problems we told him about in the report.

After reading the action plan in March, Mattingly agreed to create a new “visiting unit” at ACS, with five staff. The new unit, which will begin work this summer, will help agencies improve visiting.

ACS also decided to open three “family centers” in the fall. These will be places where parents can visit with their kids, take parenting skills classes or even stay over night if they're ready for overnight visits but don't have housing.

At the Center for Family Representation, we're also working on a special program called “Visit Hosts.” The idea has been around for years. Sometimes a guidance counselor will say, “It's OK with me if the parent comes and does homework with her children at our afterschool program.” Or a grandmother will say, “I'll host a Sunday dinner for all the children, but my daughter's not coming in the door if she's high.” Those were visit hosts—people who agreed to supervise visits, but don't work for the foster care agency.

The Visit Host program would make that kind of visit more common. Visit hosts would allow parents and their kids, or sibling groups, to visit each other more often. They could get together outside of an agency office, which is a lot better for parents and kids.

At SPRs and in court, caseworkers would ask families, “Is there anyone who could be a visit host for your family?” Right now, we're trying out visit hosts in four agencies. If it takes root, many more agencies could offer parents the chance to have better visits more often.

A Time To Bond

Making the most of your visits.

Jacqueline Israel, whose children spent six years in foster care, is a parent advocate at Graham Windham. She helps parents at the agency understand their rights and get the help they need. Here she explains how to make the most of your visits.



1. Bring Toys and Games

When you visit at the agency, the room just isn't a home environment. I suggest that parents bring games, coloring books, activity books, crayons. Play some soft music, and bring books to read to your child. You can even bring your own visiting blanket so you and your children can sit down on the floor with Legos and blocks.

2. Make Visits a Time to Bond

During the visit, you definitely want to interact. Sometimes I see parents come and they look at the kid, sitting far apart. It's not like visiting at a hospital. It's a time to strengthen the bond you have with your child.

Some parents want to do homework with the children, and it's a good thing to care about your child's education, but if homework is troubling and causes tension in your family, I wouldn't suggest doing that during a visit. When you're getting frustrated, you're not building your bond.

Don't use your visits to complain about the situation, or dump your feelings on your child. That takes quality time away from your child.

3. Don't Make Promises You Can't Keep

One of the hardest moments is when children ask, "When am I coming home?" Be as truthful and honest as you can be, while keeping in mind the child's age. Tell your children, "I wish I could take you home right now, but I can't. I'm working on it, and I'll take you home as soon as possible."

Don't make promises that you can't keep. If you say, "You'll be home next week," and it doesn't happen, your child won't know who to trust, or what is true and what is false.

4. Expect Your Kids to Act Up

It's normal for a child to feel angry or scared about being in foster care, and to act up as a result. When parents hear that a child is acting up, they start thinking, "Why is this happening? Is someone hurting my child?" They feel powerless.

You might feel very scared if you can't help your child. You might even start acting out, becoming angry or explosive. But you can help your children by reassuring them that you're working to get them home, and letting them know that you love them and

care about them even when you're not together.

You also want to let your child know that there's nothing they can do to get home faster. I've seen children act out because they believe that if they act bad, the system will say, "This child is too bad, we better send the child home to their mom."

children's doctor's appointment," or, "For open school night we met and went together to discuss the children's education."

When my kids were in care, the court could say to me, "Jacqueline, you were a bad parent for all these things you did in the past." But I could say, "I have

You can help your children by reassuring them that you're working to get them home, and letting them know that you love them and care about them even when you're not together.

5. Build a Relationship with the Foster Mom

You can help your child and your case by being polite to the foster parent. At visits, say, "Hello. How are my kids? How are they in school? Can I meet you for open school night?"

To get your children back, you have to be part of your child's life, and the foster mom can help you with that. It's good if the foster mom can say in court, "I met the children's mother at the

a relationship with my children that's nurturing, structured and not damaging." And the foster mom supported me in saying that.

6. Help Your Children Say Goodbye

Parents and their children don't want visits to end. Children have a hard time because they don't understand why they can't go home. They cry, have fits.

Don't prolong the visit. Help

your children say goodbye, and let them know you'll see them soon. When it's almost time to leave, help your child get ready to go. Say, "It's time for us to go now. Please take care. I'll see you soon. Ask the foster parent if you can call me." Say goodbye and leave your child with the foster parent.

I see some parents who stay with their children as long as they can. One parent follows the foster parent's car. Don't do that. That's not a healthy thing for the children to see. If you break the rules, your children get the idea that they can also choose whether to follow rules. That will hurt your children in school and when they come back home.

7. Keep Visiting and It Will Get Easier

Sometimes I hear parents say, "It's just too hard to visit my child at the agency." But the agency is not going to say, "Take all the time you need and your child will be there for you when you're ready." You need to prove to the agency that you care about your child.

You and your child will feel better if you spend more time together. Even a week apart can feel like an eternity to a child, because children are having new experiences every day. One month they're in diapers. Soon they're saying, "You mean to tell me that light has a speed and water turns into clouds?"

Do your best to bond with your child, and the visits will get easier.

Fighting For Closeness

BY CHRIS BROOKS

My mother and I used to fight so much that she put me in a group home. My mom would come and visit once every two weeks. During the visits, sometimes we would fight. We'd fuss about my behavior at home and about when I could come home again. I would get extremely mad and start yelling and she would yell at me, too.

Eventually they moved me farther away from my mom because we were fighting so much, and then they moved me again. Even though we fought, I miss her now and I wish that I lived closer to her.

I miss some of the things she used to do to show me she loved me during the times when we were getting along. When I was little, she used to pick me up and hold me when I got hurt. Sometimes she would baby me and tickle me. She'd read me stories and bake chocolate cake and chocolate chip cookies. I used to try to eat all the cookies. (Sometimes she would whip me for that.)

Once my mom took my brother and me to Sea World to see all

the whales. That's a nice memory I have being with her.

Now I just see my mom and my brother on the holidays. I have lots of fun with my cousins. We crack jokes and make each other laugh. I feel happier with them than at almost any other time.

It used to be that I would joke with my cousins all the time about how fat my brother was.

more about my feelings, then our relationship would improve even more.

I haven't apologized to my mother. I don't feel like doing that until she apologizes to me for whupping me so much when I was younger. She did me wrong, too, and I'm still angry. If my mom apologized, it would seem like she wanted to change and that would make me want to

Not having my mother around makes me feel sad and lonely. I wish we could work things out because I don't want to fight with her anymore.

But one time last year I took the time to talk to my brother and say I'm sorry for talking about him all these years and for the times I beat him up, too.

When I said that, he said, "That's OK," and then he kind of smiled. I felt a little better after that. We haven't fought since then. I believe that if I had a chance to see my brother and talk to him

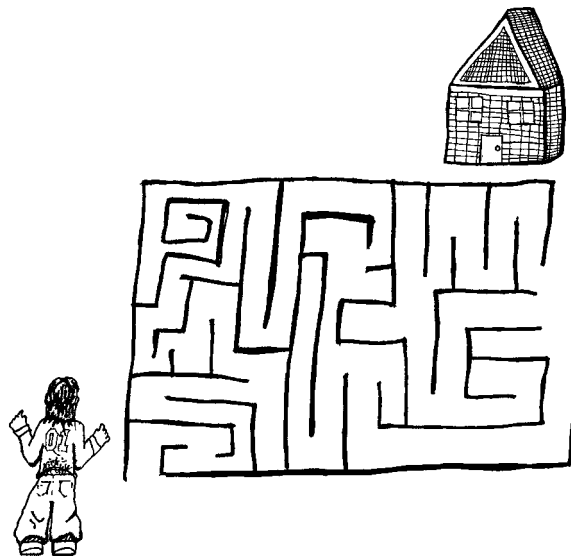
change. I wish we could work things out because I don't want to fight with her anymore.

Not having my mother around or having any kind of mother in my life today makes me feel sad and lonely, like there's no one who cares for me. Being so far from my family sometimes makes me feel like even my mother and brother don't care for me.

Whenever I ask my mom to take me home and she says no, we fight. But if we saw each other more often, maybe we would have more of a chance to talk. I could ask my mom about how she feels about me, and I could tell her how I feel about her. Then we might be able to work something out. Since I'm older, I would try to talk to her with a level tone and hold my tongue when I wanted to say something smart.

Things might get worse because we argue loud and hard, but I'd rather be screaming and yelling at her than be so far away.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEXANDER MARTINEZ AND ROLAND DRUJGO



ABOUT **Rise**

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with New York City's child welfare system (ACS). Its mission is to provide parents with true stories about the system's role in families' lives and information that will help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

For more information about Rise, or to join the writing staff, please call Nora McCarthy at (212) 279-0708 x113. Or find Rise on the web at www.youthcomm.org/rise.

Most of the stories were written by participants in the writing group

run by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) and Represent magazine. CWOP is an advocacy program that teaches parents about their rights. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000. Represent is a magazine written by and for youth in foster care nationwide. For more information about Represent, call (212) 279-0708.

Rise is published by Youth Communication, which is dedicated to publishing stories by those whose voices are rarely heard in the media. It is funded by the Child Welfare Fund.

Tough Questions Brought Us Closer

BY MILAGROS SANCHEZ

In the months before I got my sons home from foster care, I built a bond with my boys. I picked them up every other weekend and always had something planned for us to do as a family. We went out to the movies, the beach, the pool, a museum or the library. Sometimes we would just stay home and play family games. I would also make them their favorite foods. But the one thing that I made sure we did on Fridays was a family conference.

Our family conferences were a chance for them to let out their feelings about what they went through because of my drug addiction. They were allowed to ask me any questions they wanted about when I was not with them. Answering their questions, I would get very emotional, but it helped us get closer.

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?" I prayed that they would forgive me for my honest answers.

I told my sons, "I had a drug problem, which not only took over my life but my mind as well. Even though I thought about you and love you, the drugs were more important to me at the time. That was what the drugs were telling me.

"And that is why I left you with grandma: because I didn't want to drag you into my world of drugs and insanity. But you were always in my heart and in my thoughts while 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. What's important is that I'm here now and I love you guys to infinity and beyond."

When I got my children back, I felt that God had given me a second chance to be the best mom I could be.

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