



BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



A Special Connection

INTERVIEW WITH MARTY BEYER

One of the most important things for a parent to do during visits is to try to

imagine: What does my child want from me during our time together?

CONFUSING BEHAVIORS

At times, it can be difficult to understand your child’s feelings and needs in visits.

Unfortunately, children usually can’t explain their feelings. A child won’t walk in and say, “I’m feeling really confused. I don’t know why I’m not living with you. Why am I living with someone else and visiting you in an office?” Most children behave their feelings and can’t explain them in words.

So the child might just walk over and start playing with a toy without saying hello. Many parents feel rejected if they don’t get a hug or hello. But parents can say to themselves, “I will go to my child and get on the floor and play even though my child hasn’t said hello.”

A SPECIAL CONNECTION

It’s very sad for parents to think, “My child needs me to work hard to build our relationship while my child is in foster care.” But kids are sad, confused and angry about being in foster care. And even a few weeks or months is a long time for a child to be apart from a parent.

The most important thing during visits is to get a back-and-forth going with your children, whether that’s through singing a song, smiling at each other, playing a game, or talking about school. Taking pictures, doing art, and even painting fingernails can be a time to listen to your child talk about their lives and a way to make that special connection.

Closer Than Ever

BY SANDRA EVANS

When I became a mom, I was afraid of making all the mistakes that my mother had made with me. Finally, I took a parenting class that showed me how to connect with my family in a different way.

The most valuable thing I learned was that I needed to set aside time to spend with my children to give them the attention they craved. I didn’t realize that children need attention in order to thrive.

I also learned that children feel safe when they have a daily schedule and when you’re consistent with them. I learned to hug and to hold my children more, tell them I love them, praise them when they do something good, and stick with a punishment once I set it.

In visits, I started to play with our kids, read to them, color and really enjoy our time. I wanted to hear about everything they had been doing. These were things I hadn’t done with my children before.

One day we went to the zoo. I’ll never forget the expressions on our children’s faces while they looked at the animals. It felt incredible that we could experience such joy as a family.

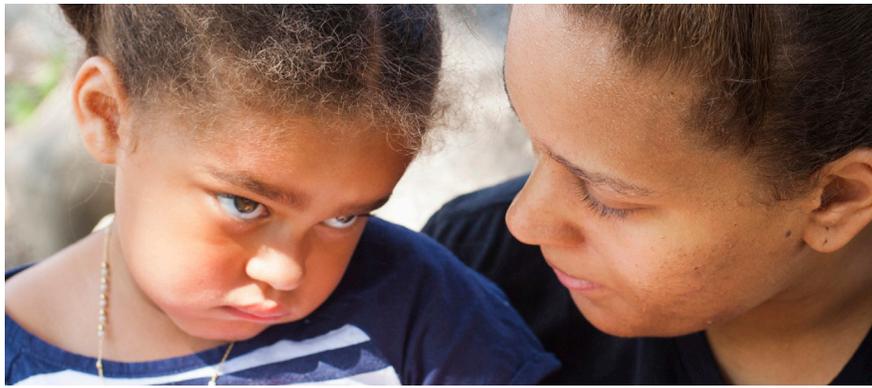
Now we do projects like baking or making our own Christmas ornaments. It helps to strengthen the bond between my children and me. We are closer than ever.

WORDS THAT HEAL

“I know this is really hard but we will get through this.”

“I know you might be mad at me but you still need to listen and follow rules.”

“I need to do some things before you can come home but none of this is your fault.”



Melissa Landrau and her daughter

Starting Over

After missing visits, I'm reconnecting with my kids

BY MELISSA LANDRAU

After my children went into foster care, my bond with my kids fell off because I failed to focus on them. I was depressed, felt betrayed by my family, and was in a domestic violence relationship. I fell off my visiting schedule for months at a time.

I was also telling myself that I'm not a worthy mother and I didn't deserve my kids, and that I'm just like my mom, who left me in the hospital at birth. My great grandmother raised me until she passed away and I fell in the system.

STARTING OVER

Visiting my kids again steadily after missing visits for so long was emotional. My kids didn't recognize me. They were scared and pushed me away.

My daughter showed her feelings by getting fussy and aggravated really fast. When I would say, "I love you," my daughter said, "Mommy, I don't want you to love me." Because of what I went through as a kid, I understood it was because of the absences in her life. I let my kids know that I understood why they were mad.

I won her trust back by showing her change instead of telling her that I changed. I played with them in the playroom and I read to them and talked to them. With my actions, I showed that I missed my kids and I wanted them back.

HAPPIER TOGETHER

The more I visited, the more I started telling myself, "You have to do what you are supposed to do and you can't give up. This is not a cycle. You're going to succeed."

Now my kids and I are in family therapy. The therapist taught me how important it is for my daughters to talk about their feelings. I'm proud of my daughters. We like to play house, blocks and Playdoh. We also like to read to each other and go for walks. They are able to express their feelings more and are happier and more energetic.

Using Positive Discipline

Many times parents aren't sure if it's OK to discipline their children during visits. But you're still the parent, and your children want to see that you're in charge.

Kids feel safer and act calmer when they know the rules and consequences. Here's what you can do:

- 1 Make sure you know the rules of your agency's visiting space.** Ask your caseworker if it's OK to play music, dance, sing, use your phone, eat, yell, give a time-out, run around. Talk to your kids about the agency's rules and your own.
- 2 Give consistent consequences.** The first step if your child is breaking a rule is to make eye contact and simply say, "No. That is not allowed."

If your child does not stop, you can give a warning such as, "I will take away your toy if you don't stop." If needed, a parent can take away a toy for a few minutes, give a short time out, or end an activity.

You can say, "I want you to sit here and calm down until I say it's time to play again." Or, "This game isn't a good idea anymore. Let's have a snack, or read."

- 3 If you break a rule, acknowledge it and apologize.** You can say, "I'm sorry I got upset and yelled." This can show your children how to handle their own mistakes.
- 4 Praise your child.** In addition to consequences for negative behavior, you can reward good behavior, even just by saying, "That was nice" or "I like how you did that."



TIPS is brought to you by the parents at Rise, which trains parents to write and speak about their experiences with the foster care system.

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