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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 after reunification.

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.

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.

OVER 

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:
