

Rise

Building a Bridge

Stories about connections between parents and foster parents.



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Rise

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About Rise

Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to help 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 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.

A Chance to Connect

Parents and foster parents came together to share our experiences with you.

In Fall 2008, Rise held a writing workshop for parents and foster parents to write about their experiences with each other. The workshop was a wonderful experience for me. I met other parents whose children were in the child welfare system. One parent actually reunited with her children during our workshop! I also met foster and adoptive parents who were sweet as can be.

We would write and talk for hours. Mainly talk, because we all enjoyed writing, so we would come in with our writing ready to show the editor, Nora. Keep in mind, Nora loved our writing, not our talking. So we would sneak and talk when she wasn't looking and then laugh like schoolchildren. It was a fun-filled adventure.

Our conflicts and differences of opinion were not obvious in the beginning but became evident the more we met with each other. Once we had already established trust and respect, it was safe to disagree with one another. Sometimes our differences of opinion took up our sessions, but we all felt safe and we always came back. We even invited each other to events outside the workshop.

We hope and pray that our writing will enlighten other parents and foster parents and encourage them to work together for the most important people, children in foster care. We also hope child welfare professionals will use our writing for education and training. The stories can help us rethink our beliefs and consider new ways to connect.

—Latonya Baskerville

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Introduction

How to Use This Booklet

Building a Bridge is designed to help you train and support staff, parents and foster parents to improve collaboration. Positive relationships between parents and foster parents help children feel more secure during placement and adjust more easily after reunification.

Parents and foster parents chose to write about their experiences in this booklet in order to help others understand the power of positive connections, the impact of negative relationships and the tools they used to overcome stereotypes, fears and miscommunication. Stories are accompanied by Leader's Guides that give you step-by-step instructions for using the stories to promote openness and self-reflection in training, parent or foster parent support groups, or one-on-one discussion.

Leader's Guides: Tools and Goals

The four-page Leader's Guides provide a summary of the story and four tools for using each story in a group discussion: a group introduction, group discussion questions, group reflection worksheet, and personal reflection worksheet. You can use all of the tools in order (approximately 90 minutes) or choose the tools that would work best given your time, audience and goal.

Tool:	Goal:	How to Use:
Group Introduction	Clearly introduce the concept you would like the group to understand and reflect on during the session.	Read the introduction aloud to begin your group.
Read and Discuss Story	Help participants reflect on the complex motivations and behaviors of the real people described in the story and understand the steps that others have taken to improve their relationships.	Ask for volunteers to read the story out loud, giving each person a chance to read a short section. Then ask participants to reflect on the key moments in the story. Remind participants of the story moment and ask the question, allowing a few minutes for group discussion of each question.

Tool:	Goal:	How to Use:
Group Reflection worksheet	Guide the group in discussing the general lessons of the story so they can conceptualize how parents, foster parents and child welfare staff can each contribute to a positive dynamic. The “sentence openers” give participants a chance to respond to the story, while the “suggestions” section encourages group brainstorming about the actions that parents, foster parents and staff can take to improve collaboration.	Ask participants to fill out the worksheet and share their responses, either with the entire group, or in small groups or pairs. Begin with general responses to the “sentence openers,” then go through suggestions for parents, foster parents and staff one by one. You may want to write suggestions on a board at the front of the room.
Personal Reflection worksheet	Support participants in reflecting on how they can apply the lessons of the story to their own lives and roles as parents, foster parents, or staff. The goal of using these stories is to change both thinking and behavior. This final worksheet encourages participants to define behavior changes they could make.	Ask participants to fill out the worksheet. If the group feels safe and supportive, participants can share their responses with the group, or in small groups or pairs. A key goal is for participants to describe concrete ways that they could change their own behaviors.

Options for Integrating Stories into Training and Support

We have designed the Leader’s Guides to give you flexibility in using the stories in training, support groups, and one-on-one discussions. Here are suggestions for using the booklet:

Stand-Alone Training

Train staff, foster parents, or parents in 6-8 weekly sessions where participants read and respond to one story each week. Choose the stories that best relate to the challenges reported by the group you are training. You may want to include staff, foster parents and parents in sessions, or work with each group separately. Ideally, a parent advocate or foster parent advocate at your agency will lead or co-lead the training.

Suggestions for training:

- Distribute the booklet to each participant. While your training will cover only a few stories, participants can read and reflect on the remaining stories at home.
- Begin by reading a story from the “Power of Connection” section to set a positive tone.
- In session one or two, read “The Bridge,” an interview with Denise Goodman, a consultant who works with agencies to improve collaboration between parents and foster parents. Ask participants to brainstorm out loud, or write down anonymously on papers that you collect, the challenges and benefits of improving collaboration. You can post these responses for participants to refer back to as they read the stories over the following weeks.
- Use the group reflection worksheet and post participants’ suggestions for how each party—parents, foster parents and staff—can contribute to collaboration.
- Allow participants some privacy in responding to the personal reflection worksheets. Sharing responses in pairs, or, after the training, with a supervisor or peer, may feel more appropriate.
- On the last day, ask participants to review the challenges and benefits they identified and define the suggestions developed throughout the trainings that they plan to use.
- Hang up suggestions in your agency or distribute suggestions for staff to use as a reference.

★ One option for covering more ground in a short amount of time is to break participants into groups of 3-5 and ask each group to read a different story. A designated group leader can guide the small group through the discussion questions and the group reflection worksheet. (A facilitator will have to keep time and be available to support the groups.) At the end, each group can share their insights by giving a summary of the story they read, an overview of their group’s reaction, and a list of their suggestions for supporting collaboration. The facilitator can ask each group to present and write down the groups’ suggestions.

Support Groups

You can set up a support group for parents or foster parents using a similar format, but with a stronger discussion of the Personal Reflection worksheet. Choose 6-8 stories that best relate to the concerns expressed by the parents or foster parents you work with. Ideally, a parent advocate or foster parent advocate will lead or colead this support group.

Suggestions for support groups:

- Again, distribute the booklet to each participant. While your training will cover only a few stories, participants can read and reflect on the remaining stories at home.
- Begin by reading a story from the “Power of Connection” section to set a positive tone.
- Consider reading “The Bridge,” an interview with Denise Goodman, a consultant who works with agencies to improve collaboration between parents and foster parents. Ask participants to brainstorm out loud, or write down anonymously on papers that you collect, the challenges and benefits of improving collaboration. You can post these responses for participants to refer back to as they read the stories over the following weeks.
- In the first or second session, ask participants to write privately about the ideal relationship they could imagine having with their child’s foster parent or the parent of a child in their care.
- To encourage a deeper level of reflection and support, give participants more time to complete and share their responses to the Personal Reflection worksheet. You may want to skip the group reflection worksheet, or simply spend less time on the brainstorming section.
- You may want to use time at the beginning of each session to check in with participants: Did they take any steps toward collaboration during the week? Why or why not? If so, how did it go?
- You may want to encourage participants to share the stories with their child’s foster parent or the parent of a child in their care as a way of opening up a conversation.
- Even if you do not use the Group Reflection worksheet, give participants a chance to make suggestions about how the agency could support collaborations. Share their suggestions with agency staff.
- On the last day, ask participants to review the ideal relationships they imagined on day one. Ask participants to identify steps they have taken in their own lives to improve collaboration.

Integrating Stories into Training or Supports

You can use stories add a stronger reflection component to existing training and support.

Suggestions for integrating stories:

- Replace case studies with true stories or excerpts from the stories.
- Begin a training module on parent-foster parent collaboration by reading a story that will inspire or build rapport with the group.
- At the end of each training, hand out a story that relates to the topic you covered.
- In cases where parents and foster parents need mediation or other staff support to improve their relationship, ask each to read the same story and complete the worksheets. Go over their responses individually or, if safe, together to create a common starting point for a difficult conversation.
- Read and discuss a story as an occasional activity in an existing support group, such as Circle of Support.
- Ask parents or foster parents to read a story and complete the worksheets to discuss individually during an appointment with a caseworker.
- Encourage drug treatment providers, parenting education providers, or other organizations that work with parents of children in foster care to use the stories and discussion guides to train parents.

Suggested short training modules:

Topic	Stories
Visiting	Lynne Miller, Albert Shepherd, Denise Outlaw, Deb McCabe, Lourine Hercules, Antwaun Garcia
Grief and loss	Karen Haynesworth, Deb McCabe, Karen Tucker, Cynthia Orbes, Wanda Chambers, Sylvia Perez, Anonymous
Communication	Lynne Miller, Albert Shepherd, Karen Haynesworth, Lourine Hercules, Latonya Baskerville, Youshell Williams, Pamela Hughes, Queenie Butler

The Power of Connection



Heaven Sent

My son's foster mother came through for us both.

By Lynne Miller

The first time I set eyes on my son's foster mother, I did not see her through rose-colored glasses—they were more like fire red! I was angry and resentful that my son had been removed from me, so I was in no mood to be friendly or forgiving.

I met her at my first visit with my son—eight weeks after he went into care! I noticed a tall blond woman with a kind but crooked face walk in and speak to my caseworker.

He Called Her "Mom"

I had been sitting on a couch waiting for about 15 minutes. A little short-haired blond boy ran past me and I just sat there staring at my caseworker. She turned to me and said, "Aren't you going to say hello to your son?"

I said, "Where is he?"

She pointed to the kid and said, "Right there!"

Now, when they took my son from me, he had long hair and a longer tail down his back. The

little boy she pointed out had one of those ugly mushroom cuts. I called my son's name and the boy turned around. I almost fainted—that was my son! I was furious.

Then I heard him call the blond woman "Mom." I nearly lost my mind. After I calmed down, the caseworker explained to me that since all the kids in her home called her mom, it made him feel comfortable to call her that, too. Guess how much I liked that!

I Asked Questions

After my son said a tearful goodbye, I stayed behind to ask the caseworker about the foster parent. I found out that she and her husband had been doing this for many years and they were in the process of adopting the four sisters they had in their home. The father was a clerk in family court and the mom had been a registered nurse but was now a stay at home mom.

While I wasn't happy about my son being in the system, my impression was that he was with people who fostered out of love, not for money,

and would be stable in his life.

I knew my son would not be coming home soon. I had been using drugs, and to get my son back, I had to do an 18-month drug rehab program, take a parenting skills class and show I had housing and a steady income.

Getting to Know Each Other

At the time, the agency didn't actively encourage parents and foster parents to connect. Now they do, because they've seen that children do better when both families that are raising them can communicate and trust each other. My son's foster mother and I built a relationship anyway.

To show my commitment to my son, I always made it a point to get to the visits early. When my son arrived, I would greet his foster mom and we would speak briefly about my son. She would give me a progress report of sorts. She was so friendly and thoughtful.

His foster mom usually brought the other kids in her home for visits, too, and sometimes she had to wait for the other children's mother to show up, so my son and I would stay with his foster family and talk.

Other moms asked me how I could stand talking to the foster mom. They were taking their anger and shame out on the foster parent, just as I had on our first visit. I told that to the other moms. Believe me, that did not make too popular, but I saw some starting to speak to their children's foster parents.

A Caring, Loving Family

As I got to know my son's foster mom, I found her and her whole family to be warm, caring, loving and patient. My son loved his foster family. The only problem he had was adjusting to the

foster mother's cooking. Once the foster mom asked me, "Is your son a fussy eater?"

I looked at her kind of puzzled and said, "He always ate everything on his plate and nearly always asked for seconds."

"He hasn't been eating very much except at breakfast," she told me.

"I'll speak to him," I said. He told me he didn't like her cooking but didn't want to tell her. After all, I had brought him up to be polite and not hurt people's feelings.

After the visit, I told the foster mother, as politely as I could, that he was just used to my cooking and that I used a lot of garlic and oregano. I didn't want to tell her that my son thought she couldn't cook!

Little Adjustments

The only problem I had was that I felt my son was being spoiled. At every visit, he had a new toy or a new outfit to show me. I didn't know how I was going to keep that up once I got him back. Soon I was bringing him presents, too.

When I spoke to the foster mom about the presents, she said that she understood and scaled back on what she got him (or at least what I saw of it).

I also stopped bringing anything but food to visits, except on special occasions. I wanted to be sure my son was happy to see me. I wanted our visits to be about us, not about me sitting and watching him play with his new toy.

At first I didn't ask my son too much about where he was living. I didn't want to hear that they were taking better care of him than I had

when I was using drugs. But after a while I did ask. My son told me he liked having a lot of kids to play with, that the house was really nice and that he had pets to take care of. I was very jealous. At the time, I didn't believe I'd ever be able to provide a good home for him again.

She Encouraged Me

At one very low point in my recovery, when I felt there was no hope, I spoke to the foster mother and the caseworker about surrendering my rights voluntarily. The foster mom looked startled and asked me why.

"You seem to be able to do so-o-o-o much more for my son than I can do. You take him to great vacation places, buy him anything he asks for, and give him a wonderful place to live."

She said to me, "No matter what I do for him, no one can give him the love you can—so don't give up."

I began to believe that my recovery was possible. I had someone who actually believed I could get him back! While she might have loved to adopt my son, she nevertheless encouraged me to do my best to reunite with him. That meant a lot to me.

An Astounding Gift

About a week before Christmas, the time finally came for my son to come home. What a wonderful gift Santa gave us that year! That day, my son's foster mother did an unbelievably compassionate and astounding thing—she handed me a check.

"What is this for?" I asked her.

"This is the rest of the foster care money for this month. I thought you might need it to get

him some Christmas gifts, since you're not working yet," she said.

Well, I gave that woman the biggest hug and thanked her.

She and I also agreed to keep my son in the Catholic school he attended, which was some distance from my house. She offered to pick my son up and drop him off every day so he could finish the term with his friends.

Even after he transferred to the public school near our house, she was there for us. If I had to work late or he got sick at school, she would pick him up and bring him to me when I got home.

Giving to Each Other

Now it's been almost 11 years since my son has come home. There have been many changes in our lives, but one consistent thing has been our relationship with his former foster parents.

My son has spent many nights and weekends at their house. He's gone with them on vacations and to family celebrations, ball games, swim meets and more. I have gone to some, too!

I've also been able to help them out by babysitting their youngest daughter. Their trust in me made me feel especially good about myself.

His 'Other Family'

Packing up my son for a vacation or overnight, I've felt grateful that my son has had another family that enriches his life. I also feel good that I'm no longer an angry, jealous and resentful person but one who can appreciate that my son benefits from the caring of a family that took him into their hearts and home.

In the years since he came home, I've also regained my confidence that I, too, can take my son places and expand his horizons.

Sometimes my son throws it at me in anger that he was in foster care. But once he told me that he was really glad we were able to be friends with his ex-foster parents. He had come to love his "other family" almost as much as he loved his siblings and me.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

Heaven Sent by Lynne Miller

My son's foster mother came through for us both.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Communicating about the child's needs.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will explore how parents and foster parents can communicate about the child's needs.

STORY SUMMARY

Lynne's first reaction to her son's foster mother is negative – in the weeks that passed between placement and their first visit, the foster mom cut his hair and he started calling her “mom.” But Lynne asks the agency workers about the foster mom and begins to feel more comfortable. She arrives early for visits and takes time to talk with the foster mom about her son's adjustment. She tries to be sensitive while asking the foster mom not to spoil her child.

The foster mom ends up being a real support to Lynne and her son, encouraging Lynne to reunify, helping her buy her son Christmas gifts and staying very involved in their lives after reunification.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about the kind of relationship that's possible between parents and foster parents when they focus on the child's needs and communicate openly with each other. By communicating about the child's adjustment, foster parents show that they respect the parent's knowledge of her child and care about the child's well-being. Parents show that they love, worry about and notice their child. Children feel safe and loved when parents and foster parents work together to ensure that the child is adjusting well.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Lynne's first impression of the foster parent is negative.	Why did Lynne change her mind about her son's foster parent?
The foster mom asked Lynne about her son's appetite.	How did the foster parent open up communication with Lynne?
Lynne was concerned that the foster mom was spoiling her son.	How did Lynne open up communication with the foster parent?
The foster mom helped Lynne take care of her son after he came home.	How did Lynne and the foster mom communicate about their expectations after reunification?
The foster parents have remained a stabilizing force in Lynne's life and in her son's.	How do you think their lasting relationship affects Lynne's son?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: Heaven Sent by Lynne Miller

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could open and maintain communication with the parent by:

2. If I were a parent, I could open and maintain communication with the foster parent by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could help parents and foster parents open and maintain communication by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Heaven Sent by Lynne Miller

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

The Bridge

Building connections between parents and foster parents.

Denise Goodman works with public and private child welfare agencies nationwide to support parents and foster parents in working collaboratively.

Q: What are the benefits of positive connections between parents and foster parents?

A: In general, life is so much easier if we have more positive, supportive relationships and less conflict. When parents and foster parents work together well, that makes everyone's life easier.

Kids in foster care get better care when the parent and foster parent exchange information about the child and work together to make visits positive. Kids also feel less worried about their families. Many kids are worried about loyalty—if they like the foster parent, does that mean they can't like their parent anymore? They feel better if they see the foster parent and parent getting along.

Reunification is also easier for the child if the relationship with the foster parent doesn't end, even if contact with the foster parent is just a birthday or Christmas card, a phone call, or occasional stopping by.

I've seen that when parents and foster parents work together, kids go home more quickly and stay home. The foster parent can become an ongoing support to the parent after reunification, someone who is an expert about their child. When things are tough and the kid is acting goofy, the parent can call and say, "What do I do?" Foster parent is able to say, "This worked for me." That can help prevent the child from re-entering foster care.

Foster parents also have an easier time taking care of a child and feel better about the child going home. They can say, "I've seen this parent and I know the child will do well at home."

For the social worker, it can make a case

easier if the parents and foster parents click and the child goes home. Being a social worker can be a grueling, difficult job, with everybody making demands and neither parent wanting you in their lives. Good relationships are booster shots that keep you going.

Q: What are the challenges of building positive connections?

A: Lot of times when you say to families and staff, “We want the foster parents to work with the parents,” they freak out. They have a lot of fears.

The caregiving family may be concerned that they won’t be able to keep the child safe. They worry that the parent will show up uninvited, or will be jealous or upset that their child is not at home. They worry that they won’t get along because they don’t have the same parenting style.

Parents have their own fears and stereotypes. They are worried that the foster parent will look down on them or that their child will like the foster parent better than them. Sometimes it’s even harder to get along when it’s a kinship placement, because of family politics.

I find it’s a harder sell for staff than for families, though. Staff are concerned that they’ll have more problems to deal with. It’s true that it’s not always perfect dealing with real people’s concerns and fears. But the reality is that many caregivers and parents are already doing this behind the agency’s back. They live in the same neighborhood and run into each other at Wal-Mart or at court and

work through the awkwardness on their own.

Q: How can parents and foster parents build connections?

A: One thing I ask participants to recognize is that all of us have a member of our own family we have to manage, and we find a way to deal with it. We’re nice, polite, keep it short and move on. That’s the way to get started.

I also talk about a concept I call “the bridge”—you can agree together about where you need to be on that bridge and move forward in baby steps to meet in the middle.

You don’t have to start with face-to-face meetings. There are a lot of ways to have contact: exchanging notes or a log about the child that you pass back and forth with the child, talking on the phone, or meeting at doctor visits where the parent can provide useful information about the child.

When you both naturally feel ready to move to the next level, you can begin meeting in neutral territory. Once you get past the awkwardness and everyone feels comfortable, the foster parent can take the child to the parent’s home for visits, or let the parent come to her home. These steps are case-by-case, moment-to-moment decisions made in partnership with the social worker, parent and foster parent.

Q: How can the child welfare agency help?

(Continued on next page)

(Continued from previous page)

A: The system has to value the relationship and you need structures in place, like an “icebreaker” meeting soon after placement where the parent and foster parent meet and talk. Staff and caregivers have to be trained to understand, “This is our practice and expectation.”

It helps if foster parent recruitment makes the expectation clear. If you have a recruitment campaign that basically says, “Rescue children from their abusive parents,” you’re going to have a harder time than if it says, “Help children and their families.”

It also helps if you have strong parent advocacy and parent advocates, so that parents are supported in being active participants in their lives and cases, not just told, “Here’s your case plan, just do it.”

The agency can also get involved in resolving conflicts. The best way to handle serious conflicts is to bring everyone to the table to have a structured conversation. Obviously, we’re talking about human relationships, and in our own homes and marriages, conflicts happen. It’s best if you can bring in a mediator, maybe not the caseworker, but someone who can really say, “Let’s back up.”

Q: *How can parents and foster parents get started?*

A: I suggest that everyone start with an icebreaker meeting to talk about what the foster parent needs to know to take good care of the child. Does the child sleep with a nightlight? Can the parent bring the child’s special toy or blanket from home? The foster parent can ask about the child’s favorite foods or activities. The foster parent may say, “Johnny keeps asking me why he’s in foster care. How can we handle that?”

Parents and foster parents can talk about how to have good visits. Would the parent like to bring the child a snack? Will the foster parent understand if the child is not hungry at dinnertime? Would the parent like to do the child’s hair? Can the foster parent write a note about the child’s week? Can they talk before the visit so that the parent can ask about the child’s activities, like, “I heard you went to the zoo. Tell me about that.” They can discuss how to end visits in a positive way.

One of things we negotiate is, “How we are going to have contact for now?” The caseworker, parent and foster parent should work together to create ground rules. Maybe the parent and foster parent will meet at visits, or the foster parent will call the parent. Later on, it might be great for the parent to call the house. The foster parent can say, “I try to get kids to go to bed at this time, so this is a good time to call.” The more you can talk and agree up front, the smoother things will go.

Home Visits

My daughter's foster mothers helped us build a bond.

By Albert Shepherd

During my first visit with my daughter, I felt like a father again. Her eyes lit up and I felt she remembered me. I held her in my arms and swung her around, listening to her giggle and laugh. The visit lasted an hour but felt like five minutes. I had not seen my daughter in more than a year because I had been locked up.

After the visit, I had a meeting with my caseworker, who explained that I needed to attend different programs—parenting skills classes and a domestic violence batterer program—before I could get more visits or get custody of my daughter. I agreed to do whatever it took to get my daughter back.

Visits at the Foster Home

Soon I met my daughter's foster mother, Mary, and was pleased to see she was a realistic and mature woman who cared about children. I grew up in foster care myself, and I knew that not all foster parents care about the children. Seeing the way she cared for my daughter made me feel relieved and comforted.

After visiting my daughter at the agency for some time, I was allowed to visit at Mary's house. That was beautiful for us. Mary and I developed a relationship over time like a grandson

and grandmother.

Then Mary complained to the agency that my daughter's stepsisters, who also lived with her, were always fighting and breaking furniture. Mary asked for them to be removed from her home. A month later, the agency decided to remove my daughter from Mary's home even though, at 2 1/2, she'd been living there for two years.

Connected Again

Once my daughter moved to a new home, we had to visit at the agency again, with social workers watching my every move. I thought to myself, "My daughter and I already have a relationship. Why are they concerned about how I spend time with her in a crowded playroom, filled with screaming children and broken toys?"

I was also unhappy when I met daughter's new foster mother. She seemed a little too ghetto. But after speaking with her, I realized that we both grew up in the same neighborhoods and I warmed up to her a little.

Once again, I requested unsupervised visits, which were granted. But the time I got to spend with my daughter was still very short. So I asked

to visit my daughter in the foster home one day each weekend. The new foster mother granted my request.

During visits, my daughter and I played with toys and I taught her numbers and letters. I loved watching her learn new things. I felt blessed that my daughter had been with two foster parents who made it easier for me to stay connected to my daughter.

Home for Good

Soon I graduated to overnights with my daughter on the weekends. Before I knew it, the workers agreed that we had a strong bond and she was ready to come home.

A month later, I went to court with my heart in my throat. The agency told the judge to release my daughter to me. I felt like I'd won the lottery.

I thought the transition would be easy. But it's an understatement to say that I found it rough living with my daughter full time. Through all of our visits, my daughter never had temper tantrums or showed stubbornness. Suddenly, whenever my daughter didn't get her way, she would start by putting on a disappointed face and then, hours later, explode.

Tantrums and Fits

When my daughter had tantrums, she would either sit with her arms crossed and a frown on her face or cry extremely loudly but with no tears on her face.

I didn't know what to do. I loved my daughter dearly and didn't want to see her crying and unhappy. But I wasn't going to give into a 5 year old's demand to have everything her way.

I tried sending her to her room when she threw

one of her fits, but she would break things. Eventually I had removed everything from her room but her bed and dresser. I was at my wit's end when I walked into her room one day and saw she had written on her white dresser with a marker. I had to leave the room before I lost control. I didn't want to hit my daughter.

Helping Her Adjust

Finally, I told the agency worker about my daughter's behavior. I asked, "Is she too used to getting her way?" I wondered what my daughter had learned in her foster home.

"It's good you're setting rules and limits but you should explain the reasons for your rules to your daughter," she suggested. "She's getting used to a new parent and new rules and needs help to adjust."

After that, rather than tell her a simple, "No," I'd say, "No, because..." or, "Not now..." and then the reason. As time passed, my daughter and I learned to not only respect one another but to love each other even more.

A Loving Connection

During our visits, I wasn't able to learn everything I needed to know about taking care of my daughter, but I'm glad we spent so much time together.

Because my daughter's foster parents cared about her and had a good relationship with me, we built a strong bond of love. I needed those good times as reminders that we could make it through the rough months after she came home.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

Home Visits by Albert Shepherd

My daughter's foster mothers helped us build a bond.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Taking a risk to trust.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will identify how building a strong relationship is a process of taking risks.

STORY SUMMARY

Albert, who grew up in foster care himself, built strong relationships with his daughter's two different foster moms. As a result, each allowed him to visit his daughter at their homes for a full day each weekend.

The strong connection he built with his daughter helped him to stay calm after his daughter came home, when she tested him with tantrums and destructive behavior. Albert learned to communicate more effectively with his daughter and their relationship improved.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about the risks that children, parents and foster parents must take to establish positive relationships with one another. To begin to trust each other to be allies in caring for a child, parents and foster parents must take risks. Parents can take little steps like asking about their child's activities during the week or giving the foster parent their number. Foster parents can write a note about the child's progress, invite the parent to do her child's hair, or ask about the child's favorite food. These little risks can help parents and foster parents move toward a closer connection.

- Do you have questions or comments about this topic before we begin?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Albert trusted his daughter's foster mothers despite his experiences in care.	What risks did Albert take to form a positive relationship? What was the reward?
The foster mothers trusted Albert to visit at their houses.	What risks did the foster mothers take? What was the reward for them?
After reunification, Albert's daughter felt comfortable enough to act out.	What risk did Albert's daughter take and what was the reward?
Albert told the agency worker that he was having trouble with his daughter's tantrums.	What risk did Albert take in speaking with the agency worker?
The agency worker didn't blame Albert or the foster mother for his daughter's behavior.	What risk did the agency worker take in trusting Albert to change his parenting style?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: Home Visits by Albert Shepherd

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, my fears and hopes about extending myself to the parent would be:

2. If I were a parent, my fears and hopes about extending myself to the foster parent would be:

3 If I were an agency worker, my fears and hopes about encouraging parents and foster parents to take risks in developing a connection would be:

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS: Home Visits by Albert Shepherd

Take some time to think about how this story relates to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents. Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

A Second Chance

My mom's addiction hurt me, but we've found a way to be close.

By Karen Haynesworth

When I was little I would sit in my room and wonder why my life was not like other children's. I would see kids with their parents, doing things that my mother would not do with me, like going to the park and shopping. I would feel sad.

My mother would just come and go. My grandmother looked after me when my mother wasn't there. My grandmother would try to take her place by taking me shopping, to the movies and to the park. That was OK but I wanted my mother.

I often asked my grandma, "Where is Mom?" She would not answer me. Then one day my grandmother told me, "Your mother takes drugs."

I didn't know what to say.

She continued, "I'm tired of not saying nothing. You were going to find out someday."

I began to get upset. I wished my grandmother had told me the truth sooner. I also felt that my mother didn't want me as much as she wanted her drugs. If she did, she would not be spending more time with them than me.

My First Foster Home

Soon my mother's addiction got worse. Every night she came home high or drunk and I could tell. She would stutter her words and be hard to understand. Then, when I was 9, my grandmother was no longer able to take care of me, so the city decided to put me in a foster home. I was sad that I had to leave my grandmother, my mother and my siblings.

The foster parents treated me terribly. The foster parents hit me for no reason and their children bit and kicked me. They also said that I was going to be nothing, just like my mother, and that that's why I was in every other home but hers.

Eventually I was moved, but most of the places I was moved to weren't a whole lot better. For many years I suffered physical and mental abuse from foster parents, and for many years I missed my family. All of this affected me badly. I did not want to talk to anyone. I spent most of the time alone in my room.

During visits with my family, I wouldn't tell them what was happening. I thought I'd get in trouble if I did.

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Special Visits

I saw my mother, grandmother and siblings every two weeks. I was especially excited to see my mother. She'd get to the agency first to surprise me and bring me lots of toys and gifts. When it was my birthday, she had a birthday party for me at the agency. She decorated the room with balloons and I had a big cake.

Whenever my mother was around, something in my heart felt complete. Just her being around made me happy.

My mother never missed a visit and she always said she loved me no matter what. But when I was 11, she stopped coming. Later I found out that she hadn't been attending her court dates, and she lost her rights to see me. But at the time I did not understand what was wrong. All I knew was that my mother stopped coming.

I just kept thinking about not seeing my mother, how much I missed her, and when I might see her again. This was the hardest time for me.

My Cousin Helped Me Out

Finally, when I was a teenager, I moved in with my cousin Michelle. Living with her felt so good. My cousin let me know I was safe.

At first, I would do strange things like put my arm around my plate so no one would take my food from me. At some foster homes they would take my food away before I was finished. I would also stay long periods of time in my room by myself. Part of me

was still missing my mother, so I would sit alone and think mainly about her.

My cousin helped me overcome these problems by moving my hand from around my plate, saying, "You can eat as much as you want here." She would take me with her to the store and spend time with me so I wouldn't feel alone.

When I did something wrong she would not hit me, she would put me on punishment, or she would talk to me. She did not choose her children over me. I gradually became more open and more able to trust people.

Seeing My Mom Again

Even though the agency did not allow me visits with my mother, Michelle allowed me to have a relationship with my mother. She thought it was important for my mother to get to know me and for me to know her.

When my mother first came to my cousin's apartment, I felt so happy. I gave her the biggest hug and kiss. It was like a part of my heart was still cut, but when I saw her it healed.

As I got older and we spent more time together, I started to tell my mother about what I had been through. She said, "I am sorry you had to go through this. You don't have to worry anymore because Michelle will take good care of you."

We also talked about her problem. I learned that what started her on drugs was that some of my brothers died in a fire before I was born. She couldn't take the pain and turned to drugs.

A Second Chance

When we talked about these things, my mother admitted that she had a problem with drugs and that she struggled to get clean. I respected her for saying that. Some people who are addicted to drugs won't admit it's a problem. Some won't own up to how their problem has hurt their children. My mother did both, and it was good for me to understand why she had such a hard time taking care of me.

Somehow I have managed to not hold a grudge against her for not being able to raise me, maybe because she seems truly apologetic and because I understand that she was in pain.

With Michelle's support, my mother and I now have a good relationship and it's still growing. My mother has now gone to a drug program and recovered from doing hard drugs. I know I am not going to live with my mother again, but I am happy to have a relationship with her. We see each other every weekend. I believe God has given our family a chance.

Tools for Negotiating Conflicts



Missed Connection

I tried to help the mom and foster mom work together.

By Denise Outlaw

Names have been changed.

For the past three years I have been working as a parent advocate at a foster care agency, working with families to understand their situations and help them reunify with their children.

From the beginning I've worked with a mom who had five children in care because she had not protected them from abuse at home. I knew that Mom loved her children but her visits were not going well.

Blaming Each Other

Every visit I could see the hurt and pain; Mom always had a mean look on her face. One day I stopped and said, "What is wrong?"

"I am so upset with the foster parent," Mom said. "My boys are calling me names and they were not doing that before. I need to talk with her."

We set up a meeting with the foster mother and it didn't go well. The mother was yelling at

the foster mother and foster mother was yelling at the mother and it got really loud. The staff decided to end the meeting and talk with them each one-on-one.

They Miss Their Mother

First we talked to Mom. She blamed the foster parent for the way that her children were acting. She claimed that the foster parent was trying to keep her children and not let her see or talk to her kids.

Then we talked to the foster parent, who blamed the mother for upsetting the children. She said that after the children had a visit with the mother, they acted out at home and at school.

The foster mother went on and on about the mother and how badly the children acted after visits. I had to tell the foster mother, "The children are missing their mother. They're angry when the visits are over."

'What Part Do You Play?'

Still, I did not feel the mother was blameless. I felt she was not taking responsibility. Her children distrusted her and she did not know how to manage their behavior.

I walked out and went back to speak to Mom. I said to her, "Sit and listen. What part do you play? You really need to stop and play everything back in your head."

At the same time, I felt her pain as a mother.

My own children were in foster care and my mother raised them. I would always tell my mother that she was to blame for anything my children did wrong

I Was a Mess

At the time, I was a mess. Drugs and the fast life put me in a world all by myself where my children didn't matter. A part of me wanted to be a mom and another part didn't. Time went by fast.

My mother woke me up to reality. One day I was walking down the street and looked up and saw her walking toward me. She stopped and said, "Where have you been? And do you know that I adopted your children and changed their names? I couldn't find you for so many years."

My mother was now my children's mom, grandma and foster mom. Knowing that I had lost my children was very painful for me.

'Call Me'

But my mother wouldn't let me turn my back. She smiled and said, "Here is my number and address. Call me. I will let you see your children." Then she walked away.

I didn't know how to face my children. I knew

I was looking like a hot mess. A few weeks went by and I was still on drugs. After being in the street for so long, I only knew the street. Change is very hard.

But finally I went home and told my mother and my children that I was ready to change my life around. My mother supported me and slowly my children let me back in.

'I'm Learning Each Day'

I was hoping for the same happy ending for this mom. I approached her compassionately. "Being a mother is a very hard job," I told her.

She look up at me and said, "Were you a mom to your children?"

I gave her a look and said, "For a long time I was out there. But I stopped thinking about myself and started to surrender all the bad things that kept me from growing. I had to admit to myself, God and everybody that I needed some professional help with learning how to deal with life. Now each day I am learning how to be a mom."

I helped Mom get the services she needed and hoped that she'd get the same chance I did to reconnect with her children.

No Connection

Years passed and I thought I saw things changing for Mom. The foster mother wanted to work with her, and Mom finished all of her services. I saw Mom trying to handle her children during visits.

But by then, the children were mad because it took Mom so long to get herself together. The three boys said they didn't want to visit and would run in and out of the room. They called their mom bad names.

After each visit the children would tell the worker that their mom is mean. They'd tell the foster mother that they didn't want to visit their mom and would say, "Our mom don't act like a mother."

Something was missing—a real connection with her kids.

One Last Chance

One day the foster mother surprised us by asking if she can talk privately with Mom. They sat together for three hours. Mom walked out of the room crying, and we just let her be.

The next day, Mom called the foster mother and said, "I will work with you. Will you help me to better understand and deal with my children?"

The foster mother said, "No matter what, I will work with you to help you with your children."

I hoped this would be a real turning point for Mom, like it had been for me. But the next day she went to court and things were not looking good. The court was getting ready to terminate her rights. Mom walked up to the foster mother and said, "I hope that you are happy now." We were back to square one.

Still Hopeful

I tried to speak to Mom to get her to accept an arrangement called "conditional surrender." Then she could continue visiting her children after termination, even if they were adopted. Once again, the foster mother said, "You can visit and call them anytime."

But Mom refused. It looks like the court will terminate her rights after all.

Still, I am hopeful. If the foster mom is sincere,

Mom can continue to see her children. I believe she really loves her children but just doesn't know how to protect them or break down the walls between them.

I didn't reconnect with my own children until after my mother adopted them. I hope that for these children and their mom, there's still time.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

Missed Connection by Denise Outlaw

I tried to help the mom and foster mom work together.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Connecting to plan positive visits

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will identify the roles they can play in helping children have good visits.

STORY SUMMARY

Denise is a parent advocate at a foster care agency. That means she's a parent whose own children were in foster care, and who now works at an agency to support other parents with children in foster care. Denise works with a mom of five who seems unable to connect with or discipline her children during visits. The mom blames the foster mother for her children's behavior, and the foster mother blames the mom because the children act out after visits.

The agency workers, including Denise, try to connect with Mom and support a connection between the mom and foster mom but visits remain negative for years, hurting the mother's case.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about how parents, foster parents and agency workers can work together to improve visits. At times, parents blame the foster parents if their children act negatively during visits and that foster parents blame the parents if children act out after visits. However, children may act out during and after visits because they feel sad and angry about being in care, or don't understand why they can't go home with the parent. Agency workers can help parents and foster parents understand children's reactions to visits and help them respond to children's distress.

- Does anyone have questions about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
The mom blamed the foster mom when the children acted out during visits.	What might have led the children to act out during visits?
The foster mom blamed Mom when the children acted out after visits.	What might have led the children to act out after visits?
The mom and foster mom didn't understand the children's negative reactions to visits.	What could the mom and foster mom have done to help the children express themselves better during and after visits?
The agency tried to facilitate a conversation but it became a shouting match.	How could the agency have prepared the mom and foster mom to approach each other more compassionately?
The foster mom tried to reach out to the mom after years of distrust.	What could have helped - or could still help - this mom and foster mom establish a more positive connection?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: Missed Connection by Denise Outlaw

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could work with the parent to plan positive visits by:

2. If I were a parent, I could work with the foster parent to plan positive visits by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could help families work together to plan positive visits by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Missed Connection by Denise Outlaw

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

Broken Promises

Their mother's behavior confuses my adopted children.

By Lourine Hercules

I began to foster because I love children but my two kids are grown. You look on the news and you see the kids who need homes. I thought I would have the patience for looking after children in foster care because my daughter is handicapped.

I have had three children placed with me. They are siblings, a girl and two boys. The oldest two were toddlers when they came to my home, and the third child was 9 days old. I didn't think I'd adopt any children, but after these children were with me for six years, I was asked to adopt them and I did.

Their mother lost her children to foster care because of neglect—she had mental health issues and was in an abusive relationship. The father was abusive to the mother and to the children, too. I didn't find this out from the agency; they don't tell you anything. I had to find out from the mother and her family because I was concerned about the way the kids were acting.

'This Is Your Mother'

At first, their mother and I didn't hit it off. She is the kind of person to say things that didn't happen. She has a hallucinatory mind. She also doesn't seem to know how to be a mother to her children.

We would go for visits and she would not play with her children. She would just sit there and watch. I'd say, "This is Mommy," but she would not respond to them.

At times, the father would come to the visits, too, and he was very scary. Once the mother and father were arguing and the little boy went under the table to hide. Another time, the father got so out of control that the agency had to call security, and they hurried the children and me out the back door and sent us home in a cab. We were all scared.

Painful Visits

One Thanksgiving I invited the mom over. At one point, the little boy went to her plate and tried to take some food – you know how little kids will just eat off someone else's plate. She took her fork and stuck him. I had to tell her, "I don't think you should have done that." I asked her to leave and I reported it to the agency. I was very concerned.

Another time, when she had day visits at her home, the youngest boy came home with a bite. He and his brother said a dog had bitten him, but she said the older boy had bitten the younger. These two children had behavioral issues, but they didn't lie. Still, she kept insisting on her

story, and then she told the agency that it happened at my house.

I had to take the kids to the agency, where they were questioned one by one. They both said what they had told me – that a dog had bitten the little boy. I told their mother, “Your children are already confused. It’s better just to tell the truth, to say, ‘I was watching them and it just happened.’”

Trying to Be Supportive

Despite these situations, she and I got a little closer. I would never criticize her in the presence of the kids. I would tell her to call me and I would say to her on the phone, “If you want your kids back, you’ve got to work with me. I would really like you to fight hard to get yourself together. Have confidence. Gain your control back.”

I thought she was a good person but mixed up with the wrong crowd. She was not around people who could help her. I would talk to her like a daughter. She told me I was like a mother or grandmother to her.

When she gave birth to her third child, the baby was taken from her at the hospital because she was in a mental hospital at the time. She called to tell me, “I want my baby with you,” and I got him from another foster mother after a few days.

Angry at Mom

At times, I was angry that she did not protect her children from the father’s violence. The oldest boy had a mark on his nose, and he would always say, “You see this mark on my nose? My daddy slammed my face into the table because I was crying.”

I once asked her about that. “What did you say when the police came?” I asked.

“I covered for him,” she said.

“Well, then you’re just as wicked as he is. That can affect your child for the rest of his life. You can’t put your man above your child.”

A Family Connection

I knew her sister and her aunt, and the aunt always told me, “She will never get herself together.” The aunt told me that she went to the house when the oldest boy was very little and she found him in a box and hungry. She’d say, “These boys have been through enough. I hope you get these kids because no one else can take care of them.”

The aunt always called and would visit. I try to keep them connected with her because she always keeps her word. The children look forward to going to church with her, and she invites us to the house to spend time with the rest of the family.

Scary Moments

The children have been affected by everything they’ve gone through. They have ADHD and behavior problems. They can be violent. One of the boys tore the head off of a doll. He told me, “This is how Daddy hit Mommy.”

The girl is very difficult. She won’t stay in class. She fights, screams and curses. When she started talking to a great therapist, she hit the therapist. She told the therapist, “I wish I had a gun. I would shoot everyone!” The police had to come and take her to the hospital. Tears came to my eyes when I saw her like this. I had never seen her so bad before.

The school was calling me every day. Eventually, I was able to move her to a new school and get her started on medication. It's been two weeks and I've gotten no complaints. I'm keeping my fingers crossed. I'm working with everybody trying to help these kids.

Unfair Treatment

I get a lot of ups and downs with these children. Some people ask me why I adopted them. Even a doctor told me I was crazy to take these kids. "They're not at fault for what happened," I say. "I'm just here to help."

It hasn't been easy working with the agency. I feel the agency has treated me unfairly. You are paid a higher rate if the children have difficulties, but I was not being paid this rate. I said to the agency, "These children are all taking medication for ADHD and they have serious behavior problems."

The agency told me, "The only problem the girl has is a speech problem." I was furious. "You don't take medication for ADHD because you have a speech problem!" I told them. In the end, I took them to court. I want to be treated fairly.

'Mommy, I Love You.'

Now, with the therapy, I think the kids are stabilizing a little bit. Not long ago I heard them all talking amongst themselves. The oldest boy said, "Our mommy is sick and she couldn't take care of us, and this mommy takes care of us because she loves us."

They want me with them all the time. If I go anywhere, even just to the store, they say, "You're coming back, right?" If we're sitting at the table doing homework, and I'm helping one child, the other will say, "Why is he getting all the attention? Why aren't you helping me?" I have to

reassure them, "I'm going to help each of you one by one."

The little one tends to flip, and then he says, "Mommy, I love you. We don't want nothing to happen to you."

Right now they are really worried because I am going on vacation without them. They want to go to Trinidad. They keep asking me, "Are we going to Trinidad? For carnival, right?" I laugh and say, "What do you know about carnival?"

Confusing and Sad

Four months ago, the mother called. I think she was high. She was telling me, "You know, you're like a mother to me. I would like us to go out and have dinner together and take a family portrait. I am working with ACS again, and I bought the children some things for Christmas."

She'd had another baby, and I told her, "I will give you baby clothes." I made a bag of clothes for her. I told the kids we would see their mother on Friday. But I haven't heard from her for four months.

The kids are confused. They say, "She promised to bring us presents for Christmas!"

"Oh, she'll bring them," says the littlest one.

"Whenever she gets the time," I tell them. What can I say? It's very sad.

I don't want her to come back into their lives again right now. I want their lives to become more stable for a little while. If she calls, I will tell her, "Make sure you know what you want to do. I am not going to tell them we'll see you Friday if we won't hear from you for months. If you want to be in their lives, you have to follow through."



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LEADER'S GUIDE

Broken Promises by Lourine Hercules

Their mother's behavior confuses my adopted children.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Handling inconsistent visiting.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will identify how inconsistent visits with parents affect children and how to make a plan for other contact.

STORY SUMMARY

Lourine has tried to establish a positive relationship with the mother of her three adopted children. She is direct but encouraging to the mother and reaches out to the children's aunt to keep them connected to their family. After she adopts the children, she tries to keep the mother connected.

But when the mother breaks promises, not visiting for four months, Lourine is torn. She does not know how to explain their mother's behavior to her adopted children and she wants to protect the children from inconsistent contact while she is trying to stabilize their behavior.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk how children are affected when visits with their parent are inconsistent. Parents may not show up for visits for many reasons. Some don't visit regularly because of substance abuse. Or parents may stay away because they feel ashamed, unsure whether they belong in their children's lives, angry at the system, or depressed when visits are over. When parents don't visit regularly, children feel confused, scared and sad. Foster parents may want to end visits, so children do not get their hopes up and end up disappointed. Parents, foster parents and caseworkers can work together to help parents understand that their children want to see them or develop a plan for other contact if consistent visiting is not possible.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Lourine helps the mother stay in touch with her children even though visits are sometimes painful.	What is positive and negative about the visits these children have with their mother?
The mother says she will bring Christmas presents but doesn't call for four more months.	What impact does the mother's inconsistency have on the children?
The mother has mental health issues and seems unable to protect herself.	What do you think motivates the mother's behavior? What different emotions do you feel toward her?
Lourine does not want the mother to visit while the children are just getting stabilized.	Do you agree with Lourine's decision? Why or why not?
Lourine reaches out to the aunt, taking the children to her home and church to keep a family connection.	How can children maintain a family connection even when the parent is not visiting regularly?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: Broken Promises by Lourine Hercules

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could temporarily limit visits but maintain contact with the parent by:

2. If I were a parent, I could temporarily maintain contact but not visits with my children by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could work with the parent and foster parent to make a temporary plan for other contact by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Broken Promises by Lourine Hercules

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

Waiting My Turn

I had to let my grandmother be the parent until my kids returned home.

By Latonya Baskerville

My children were placed in kinship care with my grandmother in August 1998. At first I thought this was a wonderful arrangement. My grandmother raised my brother and me. We were removed from my mother's care when I was 8 and he was 6 because of my mother's mental health.

Even though my grandmother had an old-fashioned parenting style, I knew she would be better for my children than a stranger. Also, I had a lot of perks while my children were with my grandmother. Sometimes I would spend the night with them, or my grandmother would give me money and take me shopping. I would take the children to neighborhood functions and parks. It was like my kids and I were living with my grandmother.

But I had so much freedom that I did not comply with drug treatment or the foster care agency.

My Kids, My Way

After a few months, the kinship arrangement began to frustrate me. I didn't like some of the ways my grandmother had treated me as a child.

She was now treating my kids the same way. My grandmother belittles to encourage, meaning that if a child doesn't clean, you call her nasty; if a person is overweight, you call her a pig; if she doesn't have a job, you call her lazy or a bum; if a teen has sex, you call her a whore.

My grandmother also doesn't believe in negotiating with a child or adjusting her expectations for any reason. My children loved summer nights when it was cool and light outside and other kids were still out playing on our block. If there's no school in the morning, I think it's OK to stay up later. No, not OK with grandma. Bedtime was 8 pm year-round.

Through the foster care agency, I took parenting skills training and I wanted to stop using my grandmother's parenting model. I believed that a parent can make the rules clear but also listen to children and negotiate. I also believed that children can be spoken to with respect, and that children have the right to respectfully speak their minds and be acknowledged as decision-makers in a household.

'I Got Custody, Not You'

One day, I decided to try a parenting technique I had learned. That afternoon I was outside with my kids and all the other families on the block. My 16-month-old got in a tugging match over a bike with another child. Instead of yelling, I said to my baby, "That bike is not yours. You must give it back."

Then my grandmother yelled out in front of everyone, "You don't say nothing to him. I got custody of him, not you." I was devastated. I could not believe that she would say that to me in front of all these people.

Still, I knew I couldn't just blame my grandmother for the situation. I was the one not taking care of my responsibilities. My grandmother probably lashed out because she was tired and fed up. She had taken care of my siblings and me because our mother was mentally ill, but I was not.

That night, I was angry as heck at myself. I sat up crying at what my substance abuse did to my family and me. I thought, "Here I am, messed up and blaming my 65-year-old grandmother for my mistakes and bad decisions."

My Breaking Point

That day was her breaking point, and it was mine, too. The shame and guilt I felt were hard to bear. I was not high anymore so I felt every feeling, and the reality that my children were not mine to parent was too painful to ignore.

After my shock subsided I realized I could no longer play around with the system. Soon I began to take responsibility for my actions and my situation. I began complying with my service plan.

I still thought that, after I got my kids home, I would go back to using drugs. But as I got encouragement and support from the staff, I began to focus on my children and becoming a better parent to them. I began my journey in recovery.

Focusing on the Future

During the 18 months that my children were in my grandmother's care, I forced myself to look past her negative comments. Even though she did some things that did not please me, I forgave her because her love for my children and me was obvious.

I didn't talk with her about how I felt. I figured it would be a wasted discussion. Instead, I reminded myself, "She is a loving and caring grandmother who is extending herself because of my mistakes and bad decisions. At 65, she's getting up all night with a newborn while taking care of two older children." I knew that raising my children was not easy for her, and I felt that it was more important to focus on the future than on the past.

My Children Were Confused

Still, it was not easy while my children were still living in her home. I saw that my children were so confused when my grandmother and I were both in the room. They didn't understand who had the authority.

My children's confusion was evident one day when I told my 10-year-old son that he was not getting a videogame because of his behavior in school. My grandmother bought the game for him anyway. When I saw him with it, I asked him, "Didn't I say you couldn't have the game?"

"Grandma bought it," he said. "I told her you said no because of my school behavior."

I was upset, but I let her maintain the authority role until my kids were returned to my care.

'They're Yours'

When I regained custody, I thought the transition would be hard but it was not. At our final discharge meeting, I felt good because I saw that my grandmother was anxious to give me back my parental role. She said, "Here they are. They're yours." We laughed and went out together to a restaurant to celebrate.

My grandmother told me then, "I knew that you would get your children back." She added, "It was so amazing how the baby up and left when I told him he was going home. He felt good going home. That is truly a blessing from God."

It helped that I lived with my children in my grandmother's home and she moved out, so my children stayed in the same schools and slept in the same rooms. The only change was their parental figure, and it took them a while to adjust to the changes.

Everyone Had to Adjust

I was so happy to have my children home again but I was also sober and very afraid. Things were a little crazy for a while. My children were angry that they had been in foster care and they didn't trust me. They threw every name at me and I had to find a way to stay calm.

I told my children. "I really want to stop yelling and spanking. I've learned a new way to parent and this is the way we were going to live." We all agreed. We created new house rules, we rotated chores every month, and had family meetings regularly.

I also put up neon behavior charts. If my kids followed house rules, I rewarded them every pay

period. If not, I rewarded myself. My children soon realized that I wouldn't yell and scream anymore when they didn't do their chores or when they misbehaved at school or at home. I would just go shopping.

Close and Connected

My grandmother had to adjust to the new rules, too. She kept coming in and trying to re-organize my home. I respectfully told her again and again, "Thank you so much for helping me when I was down but I am well now and my children must abide by my rules." We had many struggles but we got through them.

Now, almost 10 years later, we are all much older and doing fine. My children and I continue to have a close relationship with my grandmother. My 20-year-old son lives in one of my grandmother's buildings, my daughter just moved back into my house after being with my grandmother for two years, and my baby is home. We all visit my grandmother as much as possible. She is over 75 now. In the summer, we sit outside with her and barbecue.

I am glad I was able to respect my grandmother's parenting style and that she respects mine. Our relationship was not destroyed by the conflicts we faced while my children were in her care.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

Waiting My Turn by Latonya Baskerville

I had to let my grandmother be the parent until my kids returned home.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Handling conflicts over parenting.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will identify how to handle conflicts over parenting styles and authority in a constructive way.

STORY SUMMARY

At first, Latonya felt comfortable when her children were placed in kinship foster care with her grandmother, who had also raised her and her brother. But as Latonya learned about new parenting techniques she wanted to try, she began having conflicts with her grandmother.

Latonya was upset but chose to avoid conflict with her grandmother. She believed her grandmother had good intentions but could not change, and she recognized that her grandmother was loving and generous to her children and to her. When Latonya regained custody, she instituted the new discipline style she had learned, and she and her children remained close to her grandmother.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about the conflicts we may face when the child's caregiver and parent have different parenting styles. Although it is easier on children if their parent and caregiver have similar rules and expectations, many times children in care must adjust to a caregiver who has different attitudes toward behavior, school, chores, or personal hygiene. It can be difficult for parents and caregivers to communicate respectfully when they don't share similar ideas about parenting, but it's important to remember that there are many safe and appropriate ways to raise children.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Latonya knows that her grandmother is loving and attentive to her children but wishes she'd change her parenting style.	What was positive about Latonya's behavior and what was disrespectful?
When Latonya tried to step in to correct her son's behavior, her grandmother made a humiliating comment.	What was positive about her grandmother's behavior and what is disrespectful?
Latonya told her son that he couldn't have a videogame but her grandmother bought it for him anyway.	How did conflicts over parental authority and parenting style affect Latonya's children?
Latonya chose not to confront her grandmother about their conflicts while her children were in her grandmother's care.	How was Latonya's decision to hold her tongue positive or negative for her children?
Latonya was more confrontational with her grandmother after her children came home to her.	How did Latonya show respect to her grandmother while maintaining authority?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: **Waiting My Turn** by Latonya Baskerville

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could handle conflicts over parental authority and style by:

2. If I were a parent, I could handle conflicts over parental authority and style by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could help parents and foster parents handle conflicts over parental authority and style by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *Waiting My Turn* by Latonya Baskerville

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

Her Love Kept Me Going

My sister helped us all when my kids went into care.

By Youshell Williams

When Children's Services (ACS) came into my life, I was going through a very bad time. I had just gotten out of an abusive marriage, my kids were having trouble in school and I was depressed. I didn't know what to do.

I usually turned to my sister for guidance. My big sister, Gina Williams-White, is a gift from God. I am so blessed to be related to such an angel. My sister goes out of her way to show how much she loves my children and me.

A Mother to Me

Gina and I have been close ever since we were kids. When I was only 14, we had to watch our mom die of cancer. During the chemotherapy, Gina tried to ease my mother's intense pain. My sister fed her, massaged her aches and pains, and showed love, concern and care.

On Sept. 18, 1983, Gina and I sat huddled together on small chairs in that small dark hospital room and watched our mother slip into a coma she did not wake up from. When we realized she was gone, we got up together to feel her body and started to cry.

Once my mom left this earth, I went to my aunt's house and I gave up on life. Life was hell and I wanted no part of it.

Her Love Kept Me Going

Gina was like a mother to me during those years. I tried to kill myself at 14 and got totally out of control at age 16. My aunt didn't care what I was going through. She got rid of her problem by sending me away to live with my demon father in Detroit. My sister came through as usual by sending me care packages. Her love kept me going.

When I was 18, my sister sent for me to come back to New York. We lived together in a one bedroom apartment on Eastern Parkway. Even though she had just graduated from college and could barely make ends meet, she gave me another chance.

At age 19, I married a man twice my age though my sister begged me not to. My sister stuck by me all through my brief, horrible marriage. She glued me back together, talked to me, loved me and helped me through my heartbreak and pain.

'What Was I Thinking?'

But when I gave up my job and started getting depressed once again, I was ashamed. I did not know how to talk to her. What could I say? How could I let her know that I still felt overwhelmed? That I needed even more help? She'd already done so much.

Finally, instead of telling my sister what I needed in a direct way, I called the ACS worker who kept showing up on my doorstep and asked her take my two children to my sister in Staten Island. Instead, she put them in a foster home in the Bronx.

Looking back, I think, “Why didn’t I just call my sister first?” I guess I didn’t because I was so ashamed of feeling weak.

‘It Ain’t Over!’

When my sister found out what that worker did to me, she was furious. She rushed over and we cried and planned together. We went to court the next month and my sister was given custody of my children. The judge asked the ACS worker, “Why did you put the children in foster care when there was family willing to take them?” Of course, she had nothing to say.

My children blossomed while living with my sister, her husband and their son. My sister also tried to include me in everything. Though we followed ACS’ strict rules, we also did things our way. My visits started off very unsatisfying at the agency office, but soon my sister and I were taking the kids to movies and out to eat together.

We loved taking the kids to Funstation or Fun Bubble because we got to play games along with them. We played videogames, or put the kids on rides, or let them bowl. My sister and I would compete against each other on a Flintstone game that gave out a lot of tickets and prizes. I hated when the day was over and I had to go back to my cold, lonely apartment by myself.

My Children Prospered...

As happy as I was with the way my sister cared for my children, we also had disagreements.

Sometimes I felt upset and frustrated that I could not make the decisions I was used to making for my children. At times, I felt like my sister believed she knew more about my kids than I did. I felt embarrassed and angry when I felt like my sister also believed I was an incapable parent.

For instance, I had told my sister that my son got sick every two months with a sore throat. She didn’t believe me until she had to take him to the doctor every two months and saw for herself.

Once, while we were standing by the doctor’s office, I said, “You see, Gina. I told you he gets sick like a clockwork. Why didn’t you believe me? Like I don’t know my own son. You have a son. Do you think I would not believe you if you told me something about him?”

“You misunderstood me. I didn’t mean it all like that,” Gina said. “You are always taking things the wrong way. I just meant he shouldn’t be getting sick all the time. But I admit I was wrong.”

It definitely was not easy for either of us to handle these stressful situations but our love brought us through all the difficulties and misunderstandings. We worked together to make sure things went right for our children.

...I Felt Lost

My children lived with my sister for three years. For a while, I felt like I would never get them back. When would ACS let my children come home? I was doing what I was supposed to do but the case seemed to drag on. I felt depressed and lost. I half believed my kids were better off with my sister.

One time I briefly turned to booze to try to drown my sorrows. My sister and her husband did not tolerate that kind of nonsense.

"You better get yourself together quick, girl. These children need you!" my sister said.

"They don't seem to need me. It looks like you got everything covered!" I said in a sarcastic tone of voice.

My sister gave me such a look that made me immediately feel ashamed of myself. I knew better.

Where Are my Angels?

Finally an agency worker told me what to do to get my children back and my children were returned to me nine years ago. I waited so long to get my angels back but the transition was far from easy.

After three years, my children were too used to living with my sister and her husband. Once they came home, they acted like little monsters.

For months, my kids couldn't wait to escape from me on the weekends and go back to Aunt Gina, where they felt more comfortable. I couldn't blame them, but that didn't stop my tears of frustration and pain.

'Keep Going'

My sister was a big support. She told me, "I know it's not easy but they love you. Don't give up, girl."

"You don't have to worry about me every giving up again. The price is too high. I love my babies," I told her. "But they are not the same, Gina. All they talk about is you – 'Aunt Gina this, and Aunt Gina that. Aunt Gina, Gina, Gina!' Ahhhh! What the hell did you do to my children? Just kidding, but I don't think they remember that I love them too!"

"When they were here with me, they always

said they missed you and couldn't wait to go home," Gina reassured me. "They just need a lot of attention. Keep going, Youshell."

I realized that they were afraid I would lose them again and that they resented that I'd lost them to foster care in the first place. With help from family therapy, over time my children calmed down and were happy to be home once again.

Looking to Give Back

Now my sister and I are still close and so are our children, especially my older daughter, who truly adores her Aunt Genie. I think she calls her that because she thinks my sister is magical. She makes so many of our dreams come true.

I hope one day to show my sister in a huge way how much I appreciate the sacrifices she has made for me and all the love, care and joy she has given me. I want to give back to her. I show my sister a lot of love and buy her small things—gold jewelry, purses—but there's no way I can repay my sister for all she's done.

My sister even makes Christmas magical for us. She buys the biggest Christmas tree she can find—one time she bought a tree so big it couldn't fit in the house and had to saw off the top—and gives us my children so many things they can barely carry them home.

This Christmas, Gina gave me a wonderful gold bracelet. It's not wonderful because it's gold but because she had all of our names engraved on it: my children's, her name and mine.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

Her Love Kept Me Going by Youshell Williams
My sister helped us all when my kids went into care.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Helping parents regain confidence.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will understand how parents feel after removal and how to support and encourage parents.

STORY SUMMARY

When Youshell became depressed, she kept her children home from school and ended up losing them to foster care. They were placed with her sister, who cared for them lovingly.

But when Youshell saw how her children were thriving in her sister's care and in the safe neighborhood and schools where her sister could afford to live, she became even more unsure of whether she could or should regain custody. Her sister's straight talk helped Youshell reunify and her sister's support and encouragement helped her get through the difficult months after reunification.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we'll talk about how parents feel when their children are removed. Parents feel a wide array of emotions: shame, guilt, despair, shock, relief, anger and powerlessness. Those feelings may spur parents to get the help they need. Other times, parents just feel overwhelmed. Many parents have moments when they wonder whether their children may be better off in care. Regular visits with their children and encouragement from foster parents and agency staff can keep parents confident and motivated.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Youshell's sister has always been like a mother to her.	Why do you think Youshell didn't call her sister when she was at risk of losing her children to foster care?
Youshell's children thrived in her sister's home.	What affected Youshell's confidence in her parenting?
Gina and her husband were able to give Youshell's children a safe, happy home.	How might you have felt toward Gina if you were Youshell?
Gina told Youshell, "These children need you!"	How might you have felt toward Youshell if you were Gina?
After reunification, Youshell's children acted angry that they weren't with Aunt Gina.	How did Gina help Youshell stay confident? How did Youshell help herself?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: Her Love Kept Me Going by Youshell Williams

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could help the parent stay motivated by:

2. If I were a parent, I could help myself remember my strengths by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could help parents and foster parents work toward reunification by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Her Love Kept Me Going by Youshell Williams

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

‘Your Mother Doesn’t Want You’

Their foster parents’ negative comments left my children confused and scared.

By Pamela Hughes

One day when I was visiting my two youngest children, they asked me, “Mommy, where do you live?”

“Mommy lives in a hospital for now until she gets stronger,” I said. In fact, I was in a drug treatment facility, but I didn’t want my children to know. They were only 6 and 7. I thought they were too young to understand.

Called a “Crackhead”

Then, during an overnight visit, my daughter said to me, “You’re a crackhead!”

I asked my baby, “Who told you that I was crackhead?”

She said, “Auntie Dana (her foster mother) told me that you were on drugs.”

I was devastated. I was not ready to explain. I just said, “Well, Princess, do not always believe what everyone tells you about Mommy.” That was the best that I could do.

Over time, I found out that my children had heard many negative things about me from their foster parents. I had placed my children with family friends, but these people were gossiping about me and scaring my children. They would say, “Your mother is a crackhead,” or, “She doesn’t want you.”

How Do I Explain?

My kids seemed confused and overwhelmed. I knew I needed to find a way to explain the truth to my children: that I have the disease of addiction, and that was why they had to live with other families for two years.

At that point, I had completed my treatment program, was in an outpatient program and would soon have my kids back in my care.

I was very confused about how I would explain my addiction. I didn’t want to overwhelm my kids with too much information, but I also didn’t want them to feel that there were secrets between us.

I Wished I Knew

I understood what my kids were going through. When I was younger, my parents did not care for my siblings and me. We went back and forth between homes, seeing our mother here and there. I always wondered why. My family never explained her addiction and I was afraid to ask. I remember that one day my mom's legs were so swollen. My family just told me she had water in her legs.

I wanted to be with my mom. I ran away to look for her and I found her in an abandoned building. That is when I found out she was a drug addict. I saw her needle and the rubber to wrap around her arm. I was shocked.

I wish I'd understood more about my parents' addiction. But my children's foster parents have been too open with my children and too judgmental of me. They could have explained my addiction to my children instead of calling me names.

Unanswered Questions

So a few weeks ago, during an overnight visit, I sat down with my kids to begin to repair the damage. I said, "It's true that I was on drugs. Addiction is a sickness that Mommy has. I am taking care of myself right now. I am on medication to help me not feel like I want to do the drugs. I am in recovery. That means that I will keep taking care of myself by taking medication and going to meetings for the rest of my life."

I also told them, "I could not take care of you because I was on drugs but it will never happen again. I put you with other people because I love you and foster care was the best option at the time."

They said, "Why, Mommy? Why were you sick?"

I told them, "Addiction is an illness. It's just like when you get sick and Mommy gives you medicine to make you better. You can be happy that Mommy got herself better. Soon we will be back together as a family."

Still Confused

Now my children are home. I take one day at a time. I try to stay calm and not get too emotional. My kids and I are bonding. We spend all day together on weekends, and I keep letting my kids know that I love them. I give them hugs and kisses. If I give my son two kisses, my daughter wants two more.

But I think the negative comments they heard about my addiction have had a bad effect on my children. My son even said to me: "Mommy doesn't love me." Of course, I reassured him that I do love him and his sister, but I feel the damage has been done.

When my kids are not listening to me, I feel like they're saying to themselves, "I do not have to listen to her because she is a crackhead and she left me live with someone else."

My children need to be deprogrammed after hearing so many negative things about me. I hope they will come to understand that I loved them even though I used drugs. I reassure them that I will not leave them again. I am hoping that I can gain their trust again and we can move on together.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

'Your Mother Doesn't Want You' by Pamela Hughes
Their foster parents' negative comments left my children confused and scared.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Talking to children about foster care.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will identify appropriate ways to talk with children about why they are in care.

STORY SUMMARY

Pamela placed her children with family friends while she went to treatment. Instead of telling her kids, ages 6 and 7, about her addiction, she said she was sick. But the foster parents told the children negative things—that their mother was a crackhead and didn't want them. As reunification approached, the children seemed worried and repeated the negative comments.

Pamela sat down and explained her addiction to her children in simple language, but she believes her children still feel confused and scared.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to explore how to talk to children about why they are in foster care. Negative comments about parents don't help – they make children feel unsafe and unsure who to trust. But it can be difficult to find a simple, honest way to talk with children about their parents and why they're in foster care. Parents and foster parents may feel unsure about whether they're giving enough or too much information. Parents, foster parents and caseworkers can work together to figure out an appropriate way to talk with children about why they're in foster care and what is happening with their parent.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
The foster parents told Pamela's kids that she was a crackhead and didn't love them.	How do you think these comments affected Pamela's children?
Pamela was not told about her parents' addictions, and initially told her children she was in the hospital.	What is positive and what is negative about efforts to protect children from the truth?
Pamela tries to explain addiction and recovery in simple terms.	How do you think Pamela's explanation reassured her children? How else could she have explained their placement and her addiction?
After reunification, Pamela fears that her children are still feeling confused and are judging her.	How did the foster parents' negative comments – and Pamela's hiding the truth – affect this family's reunification?
Pamela had placed her children with family friends she trusted, but they spoke badly about her.	How could an agency worker have helped Pamela and the foster parents agree on what they would tell children?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: 'Your Mother Doesn't Want You' by Pamela Hughes

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could help the children in my home understand why they are in foster care by:

2. If I were a parent, I could help my children understand why they are in foster care by:

3 If I were an agency worker, I could help parents and foster parents talk with their children about why they are in care by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: ‘Your Mother Doesn’t Want You’ by Pamela Hughes

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child’s family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

‘No One Knew My Mother’s Story’

Judging parents doesn’t help children heal.

By Rita Naranjo

For nine years, I was always in and out of the system because my mother was heavily addicted to drugs. She would follow the orders of the court to get my brothers and me back, but because she had so little support, she would relapse and lose us.

Each time she got clean, I believed we could be a family again. I was forever hopeful. I loved my mother so much. I had a deep longing to be with her.

Every time I ended up back in the system, I became more confused, hurt and angry. I didn’t understand why my mother kept making the same mistakes. Why was it so hard for her to stay sober? Didn’t my mom love us and want us?

Convinced I Was Worthless

Because no one explained what was going on and why, I came up with my own answers and soon discovered an easy explanation. I figured that my mother must not care about, love or want us. I got to the point where I

hated her. I wondered how she could say she loved me when she really didn’t.

I wasn’t the only one who disliked and rejected my mom because of her addiction. Everyone who dealt with my mom in any way would start forming a strong prejudice against her.

I overheard some of my foster parents calling her a junkie and low-life. My social worker and other people in my agency said that they didn’t really care about what my mother had to say. No one could understand how she could get her children back only to trade them again for drugs.

The way people thought about my mom helped convince me that my mother really didn’t love me and it made me feel worthless, like I was a piece of trash.

No One Knew Her Story

But as I got older, little by little my feelings toward my mother began to change. I

would watch my mother in court, able to do nothing but cry. No one wanted to hear her story.

I felt for my mother. I thought the system should be kinder to her. Though I was still angry at her, I wanted the system to give her the guidance, support and resources to help her get her life in order.

I knew that my mom went through a lot growing up. She was abused both sexually and physically. She didn't have any support or encouragement and she felt worthless. That feeling was hard for her to endure, and so she started using drugs – a quick high to make the pain go away.

Then my father was killed and my mother was devastated. She was alone and depressed with four young children. Drugs were her escape from the harsh realities of her life.

Help Her, Help Me

I don't think I'll ever fully understand my mother's actions. But it comforts me to know that my mom used drugs because she still carried around pain from her childhood, and her addiction had little to do with how much she did or didn't love my brothers and me. Understanding her struggles makes it easier for me to forgive her and move on with my life.

But social workers and judges couldn't seem to understand my mother's actions or how their judgments of her affected me.

Judging biological parents won't help break the cycle of abuse, addiction, neglect and pain. Understanding and support can help.

First Impressions

An “icebreaker” meeting helps parents and foster parents connect.

Fayette Bennett, director of family permanency and conferencing at Children’s Services, explains how agencies in New York City are beginning to work with parents and foster parents to build supportive relationships.

Children’s Services is working with the agencies to begin supporting strong relationships between parents and foster parents. As you know, parents and foster parents have been kept apart. But child welfare practitioners across the country are realizing that children in foster care do better when parents and foster parents develop a partnership focused on the well-being of the child.

Sharing Information

To help parents and foster parents get to know each other, we’re asking agencies to begin holding Parent to Parent meetings within three to five days of a child’s placement in foster care. At these meetings, the parent, foster parent and child, if that seems appropriate, can talk together.

The parent can share information like, “My child likes a special story before bed,” or, “This is a toy that helps my child sleep easier at night.” Parents can tell the foster parent if the child has nightmares, what kind of discipline the child is used to, and what special foods the child likes. Anything that can give the foster parent insight into how to meet the child’s needs will help to make foster care placement less stressful for the child.

We are hoping that parents will feel respected and empowered. We recognize that parenting does not end when the child comes into care, and that the child will do better if we can have more shared parenting while the child is in foster care.

Positive Impact

Some private agencies in New York City have been using this approach for many years. Others are just beginning. So far, we are getting positive feedback. In a recent meeting, a foster parent described feeling overwhelmed, and the child’s father was

able to help the foster parent understand the girl's behavior. The child was acting out because she thought the foster parent might send her back home. The father offered to call weekly to reassure the child.

In another case, a little girl was African-American and the foster parent did not know how to care for her hair. The mother offered to braid the child's hair during visits, and it turned out to be a nice way for the mother to care for her child.

These kinds of positive connections don't happen in every case, because naturally, when someone is taking care of your child, you might feel threatened or resentful. But when those connections do happen, we see the impact on the child.

When children see parents and foster parents working together, it can reduce children's acting out behavior. Maybe they're acting out because they're trying to get sent home, or maybe they're showing that they miss their parent. Other times, children feel divided loyalty, and they believe that if they do well in the foster home, that will hurt their parent. When they see the parent and foster parent together, they understand, "I don't have to feel this way."

Taking Steps

As you can imagine, this is a big cultural shift. Some foster parents who were used to being kept apart from parents are asking, "Why do I have to meet the parent? I don't feel comfortable." But we are working with foster parent advocates and parent advocates at the agencies to ask, "What are your concerns?"

Some parents are also unsure. They are saying, "I'm angry and upset that my child was taken away. I don't want to meet that person right now." We're telling them, "Look, I know you may not want to meet right now, but what do you want the foster parent to know about your child? Can you write a letter to the foster parent?" These steps can get us to the end goal of meeting and establishing a connection.

We hope that parent advocates and foster parent advocates can share their expertise, explaining, "I'm living proof that bringing us together can work and will work for the child and for you."

Loving Letters

My mom and I reconnected through the mail.

By Erica Harrigan

My mother and I use letters to catch up on lost time and heal from our painful pasts together.

For years my mother and I lost contact completely. I was taken from her as a young child, and then again when I was 12. I've been in foster care since then, and during that time she lost her rights in the court.

But last year I wrote a story about my experiences and sent it to her in the mail. My story described the two years I spent in a mental hospital as a child, and my struggles to deal with the effects of my mother's explosive temper and drug abuse. I also wrote about nights I spent sleeping in the hallway of our building, which led to me getting sexually assaulted.

Even though the story described the pain I went through, I sent it to my mother so she could see how well I was doing and to show her how proud I was of my writing. I wanted to let her know that I still wanted her to be a part of my life despite the mistakes she made raising me.

Patching Things Up

I was unsure if it was a good idea to be in

touch. The court demanded that my mother stay away from me, and I feared that if the judge found out that my mother was back in my life, I'd be in trouble.

But taking the risk was worth it. When my mother wrote back, I felt like a piece of my broken heart was repaired and a part of my pain was wiped away.

In my letters since then, I've let my mother know that I am not angry at her for what I went through in foster care, but I am angry at her for not taking care of her responsibilities. It was hard for her to support two kids, but everybody struggles and that isn't a reason to skip out on your kids.

I also let her know that I appreciate that she is now trying to make up for the bad things she did.

'It Hurts to Remember'

From my mom's letters, I've found out that she went through similar experiences to me. She wrote:

"I am very proud of Erica Harrigan. I can't believe I lived to see our daughter in the youth magazine telling true stories. I'm sorry

I had to hear about our young lady being abused and raped as a child. All my life I was being abused and raped also.

PS—Keep up the good work writing stories and letters.”

Another time she wrote:

“You are a good writer. I hope you’re in the next issue. I understand that it hurts to talk about the past, because it hurts to remember the pain. The courts have demanded that I face my fear. I’ve been sent to support groups for sexual abuse and handling rejection and abandonment. All of us hate to talk about these painful problems.”

‘Hugs and Kisses’

Reading her letters, I was glad that my mother could understand my pain growing up. I felt less alone knowing we’d been through similar things.

Writing to my mother also has given me a better insight into why she used to drink and become angry and violent when I was younger. She had her own problems to deal with on top of mine. Knowing her struggles, I felt I could forgive my mother and feel less hurt and angry.

My mother seems to feel sad about the way she parented me when I was a kid. She wrote:

“Dear Erica, I hope you’re doing fine. I miss you...I tried to be a good mother....I love you for being a nice daughter. I’m happy for your new life. When you grow up to be a mother one day try to be better than Joann

Harrigan Norman. Remember to set rules for your children. Hugs and kisses, Your mother.”

She told me to set rules for children (when I have them) because she didn’t do that with my sister and me. We had no curfew, chores, or discipline. That caused me to become out of control. She set no rules partly because she was checked out, but my mother also wanted us to have the freedom she didn’t have growing up. I get the impression that my grandmother didn’t play no games.

Growing Together

Despite enduring a lot of violent behavior when I was living with my mom, I also experienced painful things living in foster care. Sometimes I feel I would have been better off with my mother than being placed in foster care. At least my mother has always loved me. She expresses that a lot in her letters.

She wrote: “Hello, Erica, Just a few words to say I love you, I’m doing fine...”

And: “I love you and Nicole with all my heart and soul. The real world is different than living in the Bronx. Please remember to write back...”

I am proud of my mother! She has grown a lot and so have I. I did go through a lot in the past with my mother, but I’m hopeful now that we’re both growing together, getting to know one another and dealing with our problems head on.

‘She’s Still Your Mother’

I am angry at my sister but my nieces need her love.

By Queenie Butler

Eight years ago I became a foster mother to my two nieces, ages 10 and 5. My sister was on drugs and lost her daughters to foster care.

First the girls went to my mother, but my mother’s house was too crowded. Eventually, my mother called me and told me that the girls might end up with a foster family.

I was scared for my nieces. I asked my mother, “Do you think they will let me get the girls?”

“Call and ask,” she said. So I did, and the supervisor said yes. I was more than happy. I called my mother and she said, “Thank God. At least the girls will be with family.”

A Hard Adjustment

My mother told the girls and the girls were happy, too. Still, when my nieces came to live with me, it was hard. They were behind in school because they had missed a lot of days. The little one didn’t adjust easily. All she did was cry and act out. She missed her mother and she didn’t understand what had happened in her family. My older niece understood a little more, but she had begun to go into her own world.

Once I realized how much caretaking they needed, I started giving the girls all my time and got

them into all kinds of programs in their school. Soon I saw them catching up and thriving.

High Hopes

At the time, my expectation was that the girls would only stay with me for a few months until my sister completed the service plan. I also hoped that my sister would come over for dinner, go out with us and go to the girls’ schools with me.

I helped raise my sister and always considered her a doll my mother had given to me. I dressed her up, played with her and took her everywhere. We had fun together, always acting up at the dinner table and frustrating our mother. My sister was very cute and sharp, always saying funny things. I enjoyed my sister a lot and we got along well together.

When my sister started using drugs, I didn’t understand it, and I still don’t. When I first found out and looked into her face, I said, “Oh, no. Not my sister. That’s my baby.” Her addiction felt like a terrible dream.

Trying to Help

At first, I truly believed that I would not have my nieces with me for long. But it wasn’t like that at all.

My sister didn't do what the courts said. She would do what she wanted to do, go to her program when she wanted to go. The judge and their lawyer gave her so many chances but she just did things her way.

One day she came to court late so she didn't see the judge. She took it out on me, saying, "If you didn't take my girls, I wouldn't be here in court."

It was so hard to make my sister understand that I was only trying to help her and the girls. She would barely talk to me, but I tried to help my sister anyway. If she didn't come to court or a meeting, I would tell my mother what was said.

Feeling Blamed

As time passed, my sister started to lie and say bad things about me to other people and to my face. One day I came on a visit with my nieces and my sister came out on me. She said, "You're only in it for the money."

"What money?" I said. "They don't give you any money you can do anything with. Everything my nieces get is from me."

I was furious. I spend hundreds of dollars on my nieces every Christmas, and they don't want for anything. I was upset that my sister didn't want to believe that their uncle and I gave to my nieces with an open heart.

Talking Mess

Sometimes my sister would call me just to talk mess. She would say that I am a liar, that I take people's children, that I should have my own daughter. She'd say, "The girls don't belong to you. My girls belong home with me. You will never be their mother. You can't take my place."

Then she'd ask if the girls could come to her

house, knowing that the girls couldn't go without permission from the worker. "Ask the worker at the agency," I'd say. "I don't make the calls, ACS does, and what they say I have to do, even if I don't want to. If I don't follow ACS' rules, I can lose the children. I don't want your girls to live without family."

Then she would really talk junk.

"Tell their worker," I'd just repeat. Finally she wouldn't say anything. I'd really feel bad that I had hurt her feelings and that I had to follow ACS' rules instead of doing what I wished to do as her sister, but I was also relieved to say good-bye and hang up.

'How Would You Feel?'

After my sister's phone calls I'd lie in my bed and say, "Why should I take this?" I felt angry at my sister and at the system, because following the rules was ruining my relationship with my sister. I felt like the system didn't understand the pressures of being a kinship foster parent. They placed the children with me but didn't help to keep our family together.

I had to remind myself: I am doing this for my nieces, and I have to put my hurt feelings to the side. I'd also remind myself that my sister was hurting inside and missing her girls.

After a while, I began to think about my sister's point of view. I'd ask myself, "How would you feel if someone took your kids? No matter what the reason it happened, they are your kids."

Trying to Keep a Cool Head

Still, I wished my sister would stop and think about how I felt, and especially how the girls felt, caught between two people who cared about them.

Trying to balance what my nieces needed from me, what the agency required, and what my sister wanted was very stressful. I didn't know if I was going or coming. I tried to keep a cool head, but it was too much. I started getting very bad headaches.

After the girls came home from school and did their homework, I would lie down and rest. I needed that. The headaches scared me. I would say, "Now my health is at risk."

I even worried about losing the girls. I would tell myself, "Get it together. They need you too much."

'I Didn't Take Your Girls'

One day, I went to the agency and I was told that my nieces were unlikely to go home. My sister was not doing what she was supposed to do, and their goal was being changed from "reunification" to "adoption."

I was upset because I didn't think it was going to come to that. I knew my nieces would be very disappointed. But I felt I should adopt them so they didn't end up being removed from me. I took a deep breath and told the worker, "These are my nieces and I don't want anything to happen to them."

Soon after, my sister heard that the girls weren't going home. She came to the agency and she went off on me. My nieces were there and saw how their mother turned to me and said, "You took my girls, and because of you, they are not coming home."

"What the hell do you mean?" I said. "I didn't take your girls, ACS took them."

Ready to Give Up

I was overwhelmed. I said to the agency worker, "I am going to give up. I can't take it anymore. If she doesn't want me to have the girls, that's all right."

The workers didn't agree. They talked to me and said they felt it was best for the nieces to be in my home.

I was so glad that the caseworkers at my agency were there to hear me and help me in any way they could. They were able to help me see that my nieces needed a stable home, and that home was with me.

A Sad Conversation

It was difficult to explain to my nieces what was going on with their mother. They were worried about her and about their futures.

I told them, "Your mother made mistakes in her life, and because of those mistakes your mother lost you to foster care. Now your mother is not doing what the court ordered her to do. I don't know why."

"But my sister is your mother, and no matter what happens, your mother loves you with all her heart. Her mistakes don't mean that she doesn't love you, and they don't mean she doesn't miss you. She loves you and misses you so much. That is something you can be proud of and no one can take that from you."

"It's not right that your mother isn't following the rules of the court, but one day I hope she will make it up to you. In time, things will work themselves out. You will still be able to spend weekends with your mother and do things together."

Keeping the Connection

Despite adopting my nieces, I still try my hardest to let my nieces and my sister have a relationship. I let my nieces talk to their mother on the phone about three to four times a week. Maybe once a week, on a weekend, she comes over. I go to my room and leave them alone.

On holidays, when the family gets together, I let the girls see their mother and stay as long as they want to stay.

I don't allow my sister to take them anywhere, though. I feel bad about that, but I'm afraid that if something happened, I could get in trouble.

Lying to the Girls

For years, my sister refused to believe the adoption. Finally I had to send her a photocopy of the new birth certificate to make her understand that she'd lost her rights.

Through all of those years, my sister kept telling the girls they were going home. She told them that every week and it was a lie.

Just a year or two ago, my eldest niece told me, "My mom is always saying things and has never kept her word. I am tired of my mother's lies. I don't believe anything my mother tells me. What is the use of believing in my mother if it is always a lie?"

I understood her anger, but I said to her sadly, "Don't be so hard on your mother. She is going through a lot right now. Every night, your mother has to go home without you and your sister. She can't walk into her apartment and see you two. She can't go to your room and see you in your room."

Reaching Out

One positive moment was when my nieces were in an afterschool program at JHS 263 and were in the Christmas show. I told my nieces, "Call your mother and ask if she wants to come see you perform." My sister said yes, and she was happy that they wanted her to come to the show. She was even happier when the girls told her, "Aunt Queenie told us to invite you."

The day of the show, my sister came and said to me, "Thank you for letting the girls call me, and for letting me see the show." The show was very good, with singing and dancing. We took a lot of pictures and had fun. That night of the show was the best night I've had with my sister.

Another nice moment was when my sister held a little get together for my youngest niece's birthday. She was turning 9 years old. They had balloons, candy, ice cream, chips and sodas, and they played games with their mother. But above all, my nieces said they had a nice time because their mother didn't lie to them or let them down. Everything was about the get together, and she didn't tell them they'd be coming home.

Still Hopeful

I still have hope that my sister and I will become close again. I've noticed that in the last six months, our relationship has been smoother. My sister has been taking an anger management class that is definitely having an impact. Writing this story has also helped me reflect on our situation and think about it from my sister's point of view. I can put up with her a little better than before.

It's been a while since my sister came at me over the phone or made false promises to the girls. I truly believe that my nieces will one day see us getting along, sisters once again.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

'She's Still Your Mother' by Queenie Butler
I am angry at my sister but my nieces need her love.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Supporting children's connection to their parents.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will explore how to support children's connections to parents despite conflicts.

STORY SUMMARY

Queenie does not get along with her sister, whose two daughters she ended up adopting. Queenie feels that her sister blames her for the girls' placement, refuses to follow the agency's rules, and confuses and upsets the girls by telling them they will be coming home.

Even so, Queenie tries to help her nieces maintain a positive relationship with their mother. She encourages the girls to forgive their mother for her mistakes and lets the girls talk with and visit their mother regularly. Queenie also tries to understand her sister's perspective and hopes they will grow close once again.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Parents and foster parents may feel strong hostility, distrust and frustration toward each other. Parents may blame the foster parent for the child's removal or feel angry at the foster parents because they feel ashamed and powerless. Foster parents may feel attacked or angry that parents are not taking steps to reunify with their children. Conflicts can make children feel anxious; many times they feel pressure to split their loyalty. However, it's possible to encourage children's relationships with their parents even when parents and foster parents are not getting along. "Fake it 'til you make it" may be a good strategy for slowly building trust and compassion.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Queenie's sister makes negative comments and accusations.	What do you think motivates her sister?
Queenie is overwhelmed and wants to give up but the agency encourages her to keep taking care of her nieces.	What role could the agency play in mediating their conflicts?
Queenie's sister refuses to believe the adoption and tells the girls (falsely) that they'll be coming home.	How do you think the conflicts between Queenie and her sister affect the girls?
The girls feel angry at their mother but Queenie urges them to forgive her and keep talking and visiting.	How does Queenie try to protect the girls and encourage a relationship with their mother?
Writing about her experience helped Queenie feel more compassionately toward her sister.	What do you think could help Queenie and her sister rebuild their relationship?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: 'She's Still Your Mother' by Queenie Butler

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could reduce hostility or distrust between myself and the parent by:

2. If I were a parent, I could reduce hostility or distrust between myself and the foster parent by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could help parents and foster parents overcome hostility or distrust by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: ‘She’s Still Your Mother’ by Queenie Butler

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child’s family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

Home for the Holidays

By Antwaun Garcia

A lot of kids in foster care can only dream of spending the holidays with their family. But last New Year's, my dream came true.

Four years had passed since I saw my family last. When I found out I was going to my grandma's for the holiday, I was anxious from the jump. I couldn't wait to get back to the neighborhood. Then, when I arrived in Harlem, oh man! So many new stores, and the streets looked a little cleaner.

A Pound and a Hug

When I got to the fourth floor, I saw my Aunt Nancy (or "Thi Thi") and Shaevon coming out the crib. But they didn't recognize me. They assumed I was a robber.

I screamed out, "Thi Thi, relax, it's me." She looked at me and stared. Then she said, "Oh my God, it's Antwaun. I didn't even recognize you! I was 'bout to have someone give me a bat the way you was coming down the hall." She hugged me as hard as she could.

I guess my grandfather heard us laughing and kissing in the hallway, because he opened the door for me. My Uncle Nelson, the smooth pretty boy of the family, got up from his seat and gave me a pound and a hug, as if we had never met one another before.

Uncle Mike greeted me next. He was the baby-faced, goofy uncle. He would make a joke out of nowhere. Angie, my stepmother, was just behind. She was still beautiful. Then Grandmom came into the kitchen. She seemed the happiest to see me. She hugged me and didn't let go for a while. Then she spent the whole day in the kitchen sweating like a runaway slave, cooking up a storm.

I Missed Them

When I was little, Grandmoms would mix a little soul food and Spanish food together for New Year's. By the time night hit, I'd be eager to get fat. Grandmoms would hook up the macaroni and cheese, potato salad, Spanish rice, red kidney beans, platanos, steak, chicken and some Kool-Aid. That's what I'm

talking about.

Around 9:30, everyone in the house would start to get dressed. That was the one time of the year you'd see the whole family looking like pimps. You would see my baby brothers, sisters and cousins in their gold chains and hats. My grandfather led the pimps with his shiny shoes, his gold chain, his hair slicked back with a little grease, of course. But the whole night always went to my Grandmom. She was a stunning beauty, no lie.

Good to Be Home

Then we would dance to Spanish music all night long. Grandmoms would be in the kitchen hooking up the drinks. My grandfather would take pictures of everyone doing everything. By the time it got near 12, everyone started the countdown to the New Year. At midnight, we all started hugging.

Afterwards one of my uncles would start to bug out by throwing cold water on people, or my father would throw flour or sugar. The kids would be wrestling and spraying silly-string at each other. The whole house would be full of laughter and smiles. You can't get no more fun than that!

Then, everyone would start looking at each other, wondering who was going to clean up. Around 3 or 4 in the morning, bodies would start to drop off to sleep.

This year, I finally got to be part of it all again. Damn, it felt good to be home.

Two Sides of a Coin

The mothers of my two foster youth couldn't be more different.

By Pearl Nelson

I'm a foster mom of two children in care and two adopted children. I'm a therapeutic foster mom, which means that I deal with children who are hard to handle because of their behavior and difficult to place. Many are coming from institutions and they need to learn to live like you and me again.

The two who are in foster care – boys who are 16 and 15 years old – both have a goal of returning home. My experiences with their mothers could not be more different.

Crossing the Line

The older boy is a very pleasant, genuine person. His relationship with his mother is a bond no one could ever break. But they are both very manipulative, and I've realized she is not a person I can be overly friendly with.

The first time I met him, they just popped up at my home together. I didn't want to be critical so I invited her in and offered her a soda. But I told him afterward that he should ask my permission before inviting her

over.

Another time, he came home from a visit with her and asked me, "Can she come upstairs?" I felt very put on the spot. A few times, she's come to the house on her own, unannounced. That is crossing the line.

I Feel for Her

The agency has now told me that I am not to let his mother in my house and not to have contact with her.

Still, I'm friendly with her when I see her. When we attend meetings, we walk to the subway together and ride together, and I don't feel funny. I just encourage her to do the right things so her son can go home. I feel for her. I don't know her whole life story. I only know that she's a young girl, she's friendly, but she seems confused.

She also seems to want to manipulate the agency rather than follow the rules. I tell her, "When you try to manipulate the agency,

then your child will stay in care.”

Breaking the Ice

The other boy’s mother is completely different. He only sees her at the agency, and I don’t have much contact with her.

I broke the ice when I first met her and tried to make her feel comfortable. I told her that if she wanted to speak to her son, she could call. When she does call, I get on the phone and talk. But she doesn’t wear out her welcome.

When he was graduating, he had nothing to wear. I buy nice things for my kids, so I gave him a suit and tie and shoes, and I gave her money to get him a haircut and for balloons. I also gave her a ticket to his graduation, and she asked for more tickets to bring other family members, so I gave her my ticket as well. I figured that would make him happy, to have his family around him.

I also programmed her number into the phone and told him, “Your mother’s number is in the phone if you want to call her.” I encourage him to make his own decisions.

We’ll See

I don’t know what will happen with these two boys and their mothers. I believe the younger boy will go home. His mother seems on the right path. I’m not so sure about my older boy. We’ll see what she does.

Crossing the Bridge

Suggestions for building connections

Many parents and foster parents connect only during visits, but parents and foster parents can take baby steps toward stronger partnerships.

- Place a note in a baby's diaper bag for the parent to take home from a visit
- Send school papers, report cards, pictures with the child to visits
- Encourage the child to draw pictures or write letters to give to the parent
- Write note to the parent describing the child's week
- Write a letter to the foster parent about your child's needs, habits and interests
- Write a letter to your child and give to the foster parent to share with the child
- Give family photos to the foster parent to share with the child
- Let the foster parent know about progress you've made in your case
- Ask for mediation to resolve conflicts with the parent or foster parent
- Give your phone number to the parent or foster parent
- Call the parent or foster parent to discuss the child
- Call the parent to plan positive visits
- Meet the parent or foster parent before or after visits for 5-10 minutes
- Talk about how to say goodbye at the end of visits
- Ask to attend/invite the parent to doctor's appointments
- Ask to attend/invite the parent to parent-teacher conferences at the child's school
- Talk with the parent or foster parent at court hearings or agency meetings
- Set up a regular time for the parent to call the child
- Allow the parent to visit at the foster home
- Bring the child to the parent's home for visits
- Invite the parent to participate in a school function
- Allow the child to attend religious functions with the parent
- Let the parent or foster parent know about community resources
- Invite the parent to participate in holiday and birthday celebrations with the child

After reunification:

- Invite the foster parent to call, send letters or photos, or visit
- Invite the foster parent to holiday and birthday celebrations
- Share recipes for foods the child got used to in the foster home
- Share parenting strategies
- Provide respite support to the parent or include the child in special trips with the foster family

Suggestions adapted from training materials developed by Denise Goodman.

Loss and Renewal



Signing Away My Son

My son's adoptive parents ended our visits.

By Deborah McCabe

I came to court that morning with my heart and my mind racing in time with one another. I was handcuffed as we traveled from the bowels of Bronx criminal court, arriving at a phonebooth-sized room where I was told to wait for my lawyer.

It was the day for me to sign those papers.

My son, Justin, was 8 then. For the first three years of his life, Justin had slept in my bed, curled up beside me. When I got locked up, my devastation at having to leave him was palpable to anyone I came in contact with. I could not speak his name without feeling a gut wrenching pain. Even to this day, almost 12 years later, I must mentally detach myself to cope with the pain of his absence in my life.

Five years into my sentence, I had to go to court to surrender my rights so Justin could be adopted. I still had years to go and there was no one else to take him. Besides, I felt it would have been selfish to fight. He was with a family that loved him. I grew up in foster care and know how rare that can be.

An Unbreakable Bond

When I was first incarcerated, Justin's adoptive parents had reminded me of the unbreakable bond my son and I shared. I warned them that I wouldn't be home for a very long time. I told them to keep my son away from me. After all, he was only 3. I thought his memory of me would fade and his life might even turn out normal. Despite my protests, they allowed me to talk on the phone with Justin weekly and brought him to visit often.

Our visits during those initial years were painful but wondrous. When he saw me walk through the visiting room door, Justin would fly across the room and leap into my arms. His face would light up and he would shower my face with kisses and wipe away my tears with his little hands. Each time it seemed as if he had grown a little bit, or changed in some small, almost imperceptible way. I still remember the sound of his voice when "mommy" changed to "mom."

Close Enough to Cry

Justin and I participated in the Summer Program and Family Reunion Program (FRP) at Bedford

Hills Correctional Facility. God, how I lived for those visits. With the Summer Program, Justin came to the facility every day for five days. During those days, our relationship blossomed into something truly untouchable.

With FRP, we were able to spend two days and nights in a trailer within the bounds of the facility. We were a real family again. One day a basketball bounced and knocked out his naturally loosened two front teeth. Another time I held his scrawny 6-year-old body in my arms and sang to him. He watched me sing so intently, staring up at me as if I was the sun, moon and stars all rolled in one.

It was at the end of one of those trailer visits that I finally got a glimpse of all the pain my baby felt. I asked him if he was ready to go and he actually stopped being strong for me and cried. I had not seen him cry until then, almost three years after my incarceration.

Missing Visits

But as Justin grew older, things between his foster family and me began to change. What once seemed an ideal relationship between a mother and surrogate mother slowly turned sour. I felt like his foster mother became jealous of our relationship.

Justin began missing every other visit. They made the excuse that Justin was impressionable and they didn't want him to visit prison. Then they told me that Justin had school or appointments. They didn't send him even when I arranged transportation.

On more than one occasion, Justin's foster mother told me that Justin got depressed after visits and acted out by being disrespectful or breaking his possessions. Those were little signs,

she told me, that "maybe the visits aren't such a good idea." I felt that if he were allowed to see me more often, then it would not be so devastating to say goodbye. They told me they knew what was best for him and I was being selfish.

A Promise of Contact

In 2001, there was an order from the court for me to attend a hearing that would determine whether I would retain my rights to my son. By then, the law had changed. Children couldn't stay in care for years and years. A federal law called ASFA had been passed, saying that you can't have a child in placement for more than 15 out of 22 months. I had no family that could take Justin out of the system. My choices were: fight and have my rights terminated, or sign a post-adoption contact agreement and pray they'd keep bringing him to visit. I chose to sign. During the adoption proceeding, we agreed that he would visit me seven times a year. Three visits were supposed to be trailer visits, plus I'd get phone calls, pictures, and letters. The lawyer made it sound so simple. She quickly handed me the papers to sign.

What I didn't know was that his family would soon disregard the promises they made in court, and at that time, post-adoption contact agreements were not legally binding in New York.

No Longer a Mother

I tried my best to hold my emotions in check that day, but I could feel the weight of what I was about to do bearing down on me. When I finally walked out those courtroom doors, my eyes were blinded by tears. I turned to say, "Maybe I'm not sure, maybe I'm making a mistake." My lawyer was already gone.

I felt like nothing, as if I allowed them to take away my reason for breathing. I was no longer a

mother, because I no longer had the legal right to claim my own child. I was just a criminal now.

Shortly after the hearing, I realized what a mistake I had made. Justin's family stood me up for the next two visits that we had arranged. They also stopped calling.

I contacted the lawyer about undoing the adoption, but she told me it was too late. She said it was up to the adoptive parents to arrange visits and that she was sorry they hadn't brought Justin. "Yeah, I'm sorry too," I said.

Devastated

I was devastated. Visits with my son were what I looked forward to, what I lived for. How could I give up being his mommy? I became so depressed that I had to go on anti-depressants just to get myself out of bed in the morning.

I have had two visits since I signed the adoption papers five years ago. I have spoken to my son only five times on the phone. His family put a block on the phone so it couldn't accept collect calls. I offered to pay for calls but his adoptive mother wouldn't allow me to do so.

His adoptive father told me once that I shouldn't complain because I wouldn't be able to be his mother again until my release. Once they sent a letter telling me I was lucky that they didn't send him back. I remember being in foster care and being "sent back" and I hope he never knows what that feels like.

The last time I saw Justin was in 2003. He was 9 years old. Two weeks ago he turned 14.

Still Trying

I call my son once a month. My advocate is able to place the call for me. It is rare for the woman

who answers not to hang up when she hears my voice on the other end. If I am blessed to reach my son by phone, my advocate allows me extra time because she knows I only get to parent him for an about an hour each year.

I used to write him but he said he never got one letter. I used to send him things for his birthday but the store would refund my money after they sent it back.

I have two pictures of Justin, taken after the two trailers we had together. His smile is big and bright. The happiness he experienced just being with me shows.

I keep a journal for him. I have made him a scrapbook. And I am faithful in disappointing myself monthly with my phone calls. I hope he feels my love.

Does He Know Love?

When I do talk to Justin on the phone, I tell him to be respectful and grateful to all the people who love him.

The last time I spoke to him was more than a year ago. He was turning 13. In the first few minutes of our conversation he sounded apprehensive. I reminded him that I love him and that we may not have the opportunity to speak or see each other for a while.

He tries not to hurt my feelings by speaking too fondly of his adoptive family but I want to know if he knows love and affection. At 13 he sounded like he was still a very innocent teenager, much more so than I was.

My son's adoptive parents don't seem to realize how much they have hurt us both by keeping us apart. Still, I am very grateful to his adoptive par-

ents for loving him, taking him when there was no one else, giving him the life I couldn't give, instilling good values in him, allowing him to have a childhood and protecting him.

Hoping to Reconnect

I hope to have the chance to be a mom to Justin again. I might go home in 9 months or 18 months, and when I do, I hope to reestablish a relationship with my son. I believe that no matter how old you are, you always need a mother's love.

I can hear how much he misses me when I talk to him. He always asks me when I am coming for him. Justin told me that he calls the toys he received from me his "special toys." He said he doesn't play with them but saves them so they won't break. My little brother did the same thing with toys from my mom when he was in foster care.

Two years ago, my sister was allowed to see my son and made a video. In it, Justin said he loved me, missed me and couldn't wait for me to get out. He asked if I was saving him that birthday cake he never came to get. (The Children's Center here provides cake if your child is coming for a birthday.) Mind you, it had been years since I told him about the cake. I felt like he was asking me if I still loved him and was saving my love for him.

Last time we spoke, Justin told me that he was going to arrange a way to see me the following week. I gave him numbers to call and my address, but I haven't heard from him yet.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

Signing Away My Son by Deborah McCabe
My son's adoptive parents ended our visits.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Understanding acting out related to visits.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will understand how grief and loss affect children during and after visits.

STORY SUMMARY

Deb was incarcerated when her son, Justin, was 3. Though she urged his foster parents to keep him away from her, thinking that would help him have a normal life, they allowed Justin to have many visits with Deb.

As Justin grew older, Deb's relationship with the foster parents soured. They legally adopted Justin and cut off almost all of Deb's access to her son. Despite disappointments, Deb tries to keep in contact with Justin and remind him of her unwavering love.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about how children may react to visits. Most children desperately want a connection to their parent, even a parent who has harmed them. Many children fear for the parents' safety when they are separated. They may feel guilty about not taking care of their parent or blame themselves for ending up in foster care. Visits reassure children and help them establish positive, loving connections to their parents. However, children may show their sadness, anger, fear, guilt and sense of powerlessness during and after visits, often by acting out. Parents and foster parents can work together to help children handle grief and loss related to visits.

- Do you have any questions about this topic before we continue?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
At first, Deb thought her son's foster parents should let him forget about her.	How might her son have been affected by losing all contact with his mother at 3 years old?
Justin's foster parents insisted that he visit Deb.	How did Justin benefit from visits?
Deb is relieved when her son shows emotion during a visit.	How did Justin finally show emotion to his mom? Why do you think it took him so long to show sadness to her?
Justin's foster parents are upset when he acts out after visits.	What might Justin have been expressing by acting out after visits?
Justin's foster parents cut off most contact after they adopted him.	How do you think Justin was affected by losing contact with his mother when he was 9 years old?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: *Signing Away My Son* by Deborah McCabe

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could help children manage grief and loss related to visits by:

2. If I were a parent, I could help my children manage grief and loss related to visits by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could help parents and foster parents understand and respond to children's grief related to visits by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *Signing Away My Son* by Deborah McCabe

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

In Too Deep

I needed support to become a stronger foster parent.

By Karen Tucker

I became a kinship parent almost 30 years ago, embracing two girls, ages 2 years and 11 months. The girls were my first cousin's children. She could not care for them. My husband and I were not able to conceive children. We agreed to take the girls and raise them as our own.

The girls were not in foster care. At first, I refused to consider getting certified as a foster parent, even though the system could have helped us financially and with services.

We Were a Family

To me, foster care was not an option. I lost both of my parents by the time I was 8. Then my grandparents died and my siblings and I were alone. Some of us went into foster care, and I moved from home to home. I was molested, and I knew what foster care had done to my siblings.

I believed that if I became a foster parent, my new daughters could be removed from my home for no good reason. I was determined not to let anyone harm my girls or take them away from me. I couldn't see risking their mental and spiritual well-being just for money! I loved them with a special love, a love that transcended hardship. We were a family—something I had always wanted but never truly had.

My Life Fell Apart

Unfortunately, I was very young, and it turned out that paying for their expenses was a challenge. I didn't have proper budgeting skills and didn't realize how expensive it can be to raise children. My heart couldn't pay the bills.

Then, not more than a year into marriage, I found out my husband had been a functional heroin addict since age of 14. His addiction led to domestic violence. I placed him in several treatment programs. Eventually, I filed for a divorce to secure the safety of the children who I adored.

Still, I felt lucky that my girls and I lived on trim, tree-lined streets and our neighbors were lawyers, social workers and government employees. I ran an afterschool youth program and took on a job as a waitress at night so I could hire a live-in nanny and place my girls in private school. We also qualified for public assistance and food stamps.

Sometimes I felt so resentful of my neighbors. I felt they were busy spoiling for their darlings while I was a wreck raising two children, going to college two nights a week, and trying to live from check to check. Eventually, I was not able to continue going to college because of my over-

whelming schedule.

Rethinking My Judgments

Finally, a family member suggested that I become an official foster parent. I attended an orientation at a foster parent agency. After the orientation, I still did not want to go through the child welfare system to place my girls in my care, but I felt interested in expanding my family. Though I was struggling, I wanted the joy of raising more children.

I thought I could take two more children, and that the foster care subsidy could help me with the expense of raising the two girls I adored. I decided to sign on. Was money part of my decision? Yes, it was, but it wasn't my motivation.

For a few years, I took in what they called "boarder babies," children who needed a place to stay short-term. Then, after three years, I was able to adopt two babies.

I remember sitting my girls down. They were 8 and 7. I told them, "I want to adopt two more baby girls. I believe that fostering is my gift." The oldest was very excited, the youngest was opposed. I think it made them sad to be reminded that they, too, were lost. It felt good to bring more children into our lives.

In Too Deep

Around that time, I felt so confused about how to deal with my girls' parents. I had always had a good and loving relationship with the girls' father, my first cousin, and his girlfriend, their mom, but our casual relationship was not working.

My girls' parents were causing a host of problems by not cooperating with regular visits, providing necessary documents, or paying child

support. They were often promising to see the girls and never showing up. They regularly forgot birthdays.

When I decided not to allow their parents to just come in and out of their lives, the girls became very resentful and acted out. I gave in from time to time to keep the peace but that only caused more instability and didn't help the parents to become more accountable. They came and went, often leaving the girls hopeless and bitter.

At the time the new babies arrived, I decided to petition the court for legal guardianship of my older girls. The parents didn't fight in court and their rights were terminated. They were just not able to parent. But after I got custody, my girls knew they were not going home and they blamed me. I was the bad guy. We went through a very difficult time in our family.

Love Is Not Enough

I knew my girls needed structure and consistency in their lives but not how to give it to them. My parenting became very stern and unyielding. My girls became unmanageable, sometimes running away. I was at a point of giving up. I felt like I was giving them the care I yearned for as a child. I didn't understand why they were rejecting my love and support.

My family was not supportive. They felt I was taking on too much. I was out on my own.

Finally I realized I had made a truly bad decision by not having a support system in place to emotionally assist the girls and me. They were going through separation anxiety and trauma. I was reminded of my own childhood trauma from dealing with rejection, disappointment, financial stress and lack of support. I was in too deep. I

needed help!

Finding Support

Luckily, through my experiences as an adoptive parent to my younger daughters, I began to see that the foster care system can be a source of services that can help you and the children cope with painful feelings that come with family separation and loss. Unfortunately, a person's inner strengths are often not enough to stabilize a traumatized child.

I found out that I needed support groups, where I found strength from sharing my struggles and learning from other parents facing their own issues. With support, I was able to get my girls back on track.

I also came to wish that my older girls and their parents had had the structure of the foster care system when they were young. When the system works, it gives parents goals to accomplish so that they can reunite with their children. It supports foster parents by helping children develop positive relationships with their parents.

A Well-Loved Life

I am proud of what I've achieved with my four children. My girls worked hard, stayed in school and allowed me to pursue my passions—dance, music and teaching.

My older girls are in their late 20s. One is a correction officer, the other is a full-time parent.

My younger children both faced challenges. One child was diagnosed with sickle-cell anemia, a disorder of the blood, and the other was said to be developmentally delayed. They are now college bound, the product of a well-loved life.

Struggling Families

These days, I work as an advocate for foster parents at a foster care agency. At my job, I'm always hearing foster parents stereotyped as "money hunters." I know that some foster parents go into fostering because they find themselves in a bind financially and are looking for a check for a child. They enter into an agreement with the foster care system and they treat it like a business.

But most foster parents are like me—people who are driven to take on huge responsibilities with limited resources and skills. We sincerely want to assist children in our community, or family members who are facing crisis and struggles, even if we are struggling ourselves.

These foster parents are poor and face some of the same financial and emotional struggles as parents whose children enter care—relying on public agencies for medical care and financial support, seeking community services like after-school programs and daycare, struggling to handle painful emotions from childhood, and facing challenges paying for housing and food. I'm proud to help these families do their best by the children in their care.

A Mother Again

I am now entering into my early 50s and my girls are grown. I have four wonderful grandchildren. But I am about adopt again: a set of siblings, ages 3 and 5 (one boy, finally!)

Sometimes I feel so angry that the foster care system does not work as it could or should, but I feel good that I can provide a safe and stable home to children who find themselves lost, like I was as a child. The family I've built through fostering is a blessing.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

In Too Deep by Karen Tucker

I needed support to become a stronger foster parent.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Getting help to rebuild after grief and loss.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will understand how grief and loss affect their families and identify supports to help them heal.

STORY SUMMARY

Karen lost her parents and grandparents when she was a little girl. In her early 20s, she became a foster parent to her cousin's two daughters. Karen and her adopted daughters went through a painful period after she adopted the girls and began setting limits on their contact with their parents, who visited inconsistently.

Karen could not understand why her adoptive daughters were angry instead of grateful for her love and care. Her adopted daughters blamed her for their parents' abandonment. Through support groups, Karen was able to deal with her own grief and get her family back on track.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about the supports that parents and foster parents need in order to provide a safe home for children who have experienced painful losses. We'll also talk about how our own losses affect our parenting. Children in care experience grief and loss when they enter foster care and when they move from home to home. Feeling sad, powerless and abandoned can lead children to act out. When caregivers or parents are experiencing their own feelings of loss, it can be even harder to provide a safe and stable home for children. The agency can play a role in finding the help that parents, foster parents and children need to deal with their losses.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Painful losses motivated Karen to foster.	What was Karen's fantasy about fostering?
Karen was overwhelmed when her adopted children acted out toward her.	What fantasy did her girls lose when they were adopted? What fantasy did Karen lose when they acted out?
Karen realized that she was reacting to her own childhood losses and that the girls were grieving for their parents.	How were grief and loss affecting Karen and the girls?
Karen and her girls needed support to deal with their losses.	What supports did Karen need? What did her girls need?
Karen found support that helped her and her children heal.	What strengths do you see in Karen?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: In Too Deep by Karen Tucker

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could help the children in my care deal with their grief by:

2. If I were a parent, I could help my children deal with their grief by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could help parents, foster parents and children identify and deal with grief by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: In Too Deep by Karen Tucker

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

Not My Mother

My foster mom and I keep our distance.

By Cynthia Orbes

When my sister and I arrived at our first foster home, I felt abandoned. My mother had died of a heart attack that morning. My father had died two years before and my grandmother had died one year before, so my sister and I were all alone. Police took us to the precinct and then to a shelter where kids wait until they get a foster home. That night, all of a sudden, I was put with strangers.

Trying to Adapt

I had believed that foster homes were horrible, dirty places where no one cares about you and it feels like a small jail, but Ms. Molly's house felt welcoming at first.

Five other foster children were eating in Ms. Molly's kitchen when we got there. The house was huge. My sister and I had our own floor. The size made me feel kind of free. We could go to the backyard for air, or just sit on the stoop out front.

Moving to Ms. Molly's was a big change. Usu-

ally seven kids live in Ms. Molly's house. At least 30 kids have come through since I've been there. I was used to more privacy. I felt comfortable only with my sister and would follow her around the house everywhere she went until she became upset with me for doing so.

'She Is Gone'

For a little while, adjusting to all the changes made me forget my mother and I was not too sad. Then, a month after I got there, I was watching a show on television and I closed my eyes and pretended that I was home. When I opened my eyes again I was still in the foster home. Finally, I let myself remember that my mother had died. I didn't want to believe it, but it hit me that it was true.

My sister saw me looking sad but I wanted to be alone so I ran downstairs and opened the door to the street. I heard my sister running after me. "What happened, Cyn-

(Continued on next page)

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thia?" she said.

Ms. Molly told me to come to her. She told me to be strong. "Your mother is not in pain anymore, she is gone and there is nothing you can do about it," she said. Then she gave me a peppermint and I went upstairs feeling calmer.

Not My Mother

Over the years, I've adjusted to living with Ms. Molly, but she hasn't become like a mother to me.

When my mom was alive, she showed me affection, and when we talked about funny stuff she would laugh. Sometimes we would have tickle fights, and many times she would read to me and help me with my homework. My mother did my hair and helped dress me, she made sure that I went to school every day, and she cooked for me at night.

Ms. Molly doesn't show me affection and we don't talk too much. We discuss only my chores, curfew, allowance and cleaning my room.

Keeping my Distance

I try to stay out of the house because hanging out after school, talking to my friends and reading at the library stop me from thinking about my mother. In the first few years, I'd stay out late because going back to my foster home would remind me of why I was traveling to that destination in the first place.

My foster mother didn't understand why

I was coming home late. She'd say, "Why were you late?" and I would just tell her that I was hanging out. Then she would yell. She probably thought that I just wanted to be rebellious.

I would have liked it if she asked, "What's going on with you?" or, "How are you feeling?" but I don't think she would have believed me if I told her the truth. If I am upset about something, I keep it to myself.

Forever Family

My daughter's foster mother is still part of our lives.

By Wanda Chambers

In 1998 I was pregnant with my daughter when I was arrested for possession of crack cocaine. I was given a conditional release to go to a drug treatment program but for a long time I could not get it right. First I ran away from that program. Then, when I was let out on bail to give birth to my daughter, I purchased some crack while I was bringing her home from the hospital and started using again.

When she was 6 months old, someone reported me and the child welfare system put her in foster care. Honestly, I felt relieved because I knew I wasn't doing right with Ebony. Once she went into care, I didn't have to worry about whether she was safe.

When I look back today, I think, "Oh my God, I can't believe that was me." It's horrible how much I lied and connived. I was just so heavily into my addiction. I was in foster care as a child and, when I was 12, got involved in drugs with my mother. It was all I knew.

Praying for Strength

Soon after my daughter was removed, I got locked up. I got out in October and was back in jail in January. By then, I wanted to stop using but did not know how. I prayed, "God, I'm too stupid to do get clean on my own."

I was sent upstate to Bedford Hills Correctional Facility and by the time I got there I was more alert because I had been clean for months. I said to myself, "I'm going to start communicating with the agency." I could relate to my daughter's struggle and, once I was clean, I was committed to getting her out of foster care.

My daughter had been in care a year and a half at that point. I asked for reports and pictures of my daughter, but I never got visits. All I knew was that she was with a Spanish family and I was concerned that she wouldn't speak English. She was 3 years old when I saw her again.

Fighting Termination

While I was locked up, the agency filed to terminate my parental rights, and when I came home

it was in progress. I told the caseworker, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. This is not abandonment! I wrote you letters!”

The worker said, “Wanda, if you see the process as stretching between A and Z, you’re at M right now. You can still turn this around.”

I said, “No, you still have a chance to turn this around. What do you need me to do?”

I didn’t have a struggle with the agency after that. I was compliant and had workers that worked with me. I graduated from a drug treatment program, took parenting classes, found my own apartment and found preventive services. My grandmother was my backbone through it all. She supported me when I didn’t believe in myself.

Slowly Reconnecting

When I began visiting my daughter, she couldn’t stand my living guts. Ebony was afraid of me and was really not nice. She wouldn’t talk to me, she’d scream when I got near her. She’d sit under the desk for the whole visit, or keep running out in the hall to see her foster mother. I would keep reading, “And the bear said...” and if she looked at me I’d say, “Hello, Ebony.” Of course I went home and cried.

At first, the foster mother and I did not get along. I felt that the foster mother’s presence during visits was making it harder for us to bond. My daughter kept going out in the hall to talk with her foster mother, and it made me crazy. I said, “I’m going to ask them to remove the foster mother from the agency during the time of my visit.”

She fought me tooth and nail, one mother fighting another mother. She would say my daughter

acted out after visits and she blamed me.

Still, I went step by step—I kept working on my relationship with Ebony and went from supervised to community visits to weekends. Ebony and I got closer when I was able to take her out to the park and then, when we had weekend visits, I could do little things like wipe her face and do her hair and put on her shoes. When I could sleep with her next to me I felt really connected with her. I’m very emotional, and when her little hand would touch my leg, it would send chills through my body.

As my daughter’s foster mother realized that my daughter was really on her way home, she began to be a friend to me.

‘We Can All Live Together’

The day my daughter came home for good, I felt like I should give Ebony back to the foster family because they loved her so much and she loved them. We’d had overnights, but it was nothing to prepare any of us for what felt like the final goodbye.

That day, the whole foster family brought her to my door. They pulled up in a minivan with about 15 Spanish people in it, brothers and sisters, all crying—crying on the floor, crying in the street, taking all of her belongings out of the car, screaming, “My princess, my baby.”

I was like, “Oh my God, they’re killing me.” Part of me actually felt like I was doing something wrong by getting my daughter home. Another part felt overwhelmed.

I was actually planning to end their relationship with my daughter. I wanted her home with me, period. But later on, when I was bathing my daughter, she said to me, “This is what we

can do. We can put your house and their house together and we can all live together.” My heart went out to Ebony. I’m a woman of compassion, and I told myself, “There is no way I’m going end this relationship. I can’t do that to them or to her.”

A Loving Connection

In the months after my daughter came home, her foster family continued to show love to us both. I called her foster mother once and said, “Why isn’t this child eating?” We realized that Ebony was used to Spanish food and I cook black people food. So her foster mom would bring pans and pans of food. She taught me to cook pastelitos and peas and rice.

Today my daughter is 10 and she is an amazing little girl. I’m working as a parent advocate at the Brooklyn Family Defense Project, which represents parents in court and supports parents by assigning a lawyer, social worker and parent advocate to each case. I tell the parents my story. I pull out my dispositions and my certificates and say, “You can sit on this side of the desk if you do what you need to do.”

My daughter’s former foster mother is still part of our lives. She often babysits since I’m working and going to school, and Ebony stays with her in the summers.

We don’t always agree—she thinks I’m too strict and that I don’t feed my daughter enough, telling me, “She’s too skinny! She needs to eat.” I think she lets my daughter stay up too late eating anything. I’m big on boundaries because I didn’t get any when I was a child. Even so, I truly appreciate her love for my child. I’ll curse her out in a minute, but I love her, and I know she loves us both.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

Forever Family by Wanda Chambers

My daughter's foster mother is still part of our lives.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Planning for continued contact.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will identify options for continued contact after reunification (or adoption).

STORY SUMMARY

Wanda was not part of her daughter's life while she was incarcerated. Once released, she faced an uphill battle in winning the trust of her daughter, her daughter's foster mother and the agency. Wanda chose to "kill them with kindness" and got termination proceedings reversed.

After reunification, Wanda was not planning to keep in touch with the foster mother, but changed her mind when she realized how much her daughter missed the family that had cared for her for three years—and how much the family missed her daughter. Now she and the foster mother are close.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about how parents and foster parents can make a plan for continued contact after reunification or adoption. While continued contact is rarely mandated, children benefit if they are allowed to maintain connections to the important people in their lives. Children returning home after long absences must grieve the loss of their foster parent and get used to all new routines, expectations and parenting styles. Adopted children must grieve the loss of their imagined return home. The transition can be much easier on both the parent and child if the parent and foster parent make a clear plan to share phone calls, letters, or visits.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Wanda plans to cut off contact with the foster mom.	Why do you think Wanda wanted to end contact with the foster family after her daughter came home?
Wanda's daughter says she wishes that her mom and foster mom could live in one big house together.	How do you think it would have affected Wanda's daughter if she didn't see the foster mom again?
The foster mom teaches Wanda to cook foods her daughter has become used to eating.	What else did Wanda's daughter have to get used to? How did the foster mom's involvement help her adjust?
Wanda and the foster parent do not always agree with each other's parenting styles.	What do you think is positive and negative about Wanda's daughter of spending time with families who have different parenting styles?
Wanda and Ms. Ortiz come to see each other as extended family.	What impact do you think this lasting connection has on Wanda, her daughter and Ms. Ortiz?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: *Forever Family* by Wanda Chambers

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could stay connected after reunification by:

2. If I were a parent, I could stay connected to my child's foster family after reunification by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could help families make a plan for staying connected after reunification by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *Forever Family* by Wanda Chambers

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

Cut Off

My daughter and I miss her foster parents.

By Sylvia Perez

When I gave birth to my daughter, Lydia, one of the first people I called to tell was Tamara, who adopted two of my older sons from foster care.

Chubs and Little Hector ended up adopted because I was addicted to crack for many years. When Chubs was 2, Children's Services (ACS) came to my house and took him. I visited him two times. After that, I didn't go back. I knew I couldn't raise Chubs because my life wasn't stable and I didn't believe I would ever stop using drugs.

The Mom I Couldn't Be

After Chubs had been in care a few years, I started getting to know Tamara, his foster parent. Tamara and I got along because she's a loving, friendly person. She told me she loved Chubs and would take care of him. I went to family court and voluntarily terminated my rights so she could adopt Chubs.

A year later, I got pregnant with Little Hector. I didn't even try to raise Little Hector. I gave him up to Tamara as soon as he was born.

I felt truly blessed that Tamara came into my life and became a mother to my boys. She let me know how the boys were doing and we built a relationship with each other. I knew she wanted them to be safe, have a good education and have a close family.

When I was pregnant with Lydia, I became determined to raise her myself. Once again, I stopped using drugs and I found a stable place to live with my husband, Hector. After she was born, Tamara supported me. Every other Sunday, Tamara stopped by to check on me and Lydia and let me see my sons. Tamara even brought Lydia to her house so her husband and my sons could see her. Tamara cared about my family and me.

I Relapsed

It wasn't long after Lydia born that I was using again, though. After 20 years of getting high, I couldn't just kick the habit.

This time, when ACS came to my door, I called Tamara immediately. I asked her to take Lydia—

but only as a foster mom. She lived with Tamara and Mr. Sanchez for almost three years.

At times, Tamara and I had tension. Several times she brought Lydia to visits wearing clothes that were too small for her, or without her hair combed, and the toys I gave Lydia often got broken in Tamara's home.

I wondered if Lydia was getting all the love she needed. Tamara had a lot of kids living in the home. When I complained to the ACS worker, she just told me, "Sylvia, you worry too much. Tamara is taking good care of her and Lydia will be home soon."

Building Trust

But overall, I trusted and loved Tamara and became got close. Sometimes she brought Lydia and my sons to my house. The first visit was one Sunday after church. Tamara came over with all three kids.

Another time, Tamara stopped by and invited me to McDonald's to eat with Lydia and the boys. She bought me a cheeseburger, fries, soda and even an apple pie. While we watched the children play in the playroom, Tamara told me her family was falling in love with Lydia and that the boys were very protective of her.

Tamara also invited Hector and me to Lydia's birthday party at McDonald's. I was so happy. The day of the party I was a little uncomfortable. Watching my sons play arcade games, I truly felt at a distance from my children. But I took a lot of pictures and Tamara assured me that everything would be OK.

After everyone ate, we walked Tamara and the kids to the car and said our goodbyes. Hector was sad; I could see it in his face. It hurt but we

were happy to have been included.

'We'll Stay Connected'

My relationship with my sons blossomed, too. When Tamara's husband came on Sunday afternoons to pick up Lydia from her weekend visits, he brought Chubs and Little Hector. I hugged and kissed them every time I saw them.

I felt happy that they were with Tamara and Mr. Sanchez, because they gave them a life I never could have provided. I also felt grateful that Tamara and Mr. Sanchez allowed me to talk with my boys and helped them understand that I had a problem but never meant to hurt them.

Tamara told me she loved my family and me, and that no matter what, when Lydia returned home, we would stay connected. She promised to become my godmother at church, and I felt that she was the first person to ever act like a mother to me. But since Lydia came home six months ago, my relationship with Tamara has not been the same.

Trouble Adjusting

Right after Lydia came home, we were all going through changes. Lydia was acting up. She was scared that I'd leave her and was on top of me all the time. Even when I was tired, she had to be right there, begging for my attention. At night, Lydia had nightmares of seeing Tamara and getting stuck in her foster home. Lydia told me she missed her brothers and wanted them to be home with us.

She also seemed to want me to prove my love by buying her little things. She always wanted something—a toy or TV dinners or McDonald's. I was constantly explaining that we had to make our money stretch.

When she started school, her behavior became out of control. She was hitting other kids and even spitting in their faces. Every day I told her, “Lydia, please be good today. I don’t want to get a call from the teacher.” But she kept having tantrums and getting into fights.

Once I asked her, “Where did you learn to spit in people’s faces?” She told me, “At Tamara’s house. She pulls the boys by their ears and yells at them and they cry and have to stand in the corner.” That got me angry inside. I didn’t know what to think.

Surprised and Flattered

Tamara called to tell me that Chubs had also been acting up and disrespecting her since Lydia came home. Chubs had asked Tamara, “Why did Little Mama get to go home and not me?” I worried for Chubs. I didn’t want him to feel that I love Lydia more than him, and I felt guilty that I didn’t fight for him like I did with Lydia.

Tamara asked if Lydia and I would come to her house to spend the weekend so I could talk to my son. I was surprised and flattered that she called me for help.

Was She in Danger?

But my concerns about Tamara only grew in the months after Lydia came home. We were mandated to attend family therapy, and we talked to the therapist about Lydia’s nightmares and her behavior. She told him how she and the boys were treated in Tamara’s home.

At our last visit, the therapist asked Lydia, “Would it be OK if I just talked to Mommy and Daddy alone?” Lydia sat outside and the therapist closed his office door. He told Hector and me not to feel offended or upset by the question. I felt nervous as the therapist asked us,

“Do you think Lydia was abused or neglected while she was in foster care? Or even sexually abused?”

My heart sunk with sadness that the therapist believed Lydia might have been harmed. I grew up in an adoptive home where I was physically and sexually abused. Even though I knew Tamara had not hurt my children the way I’d been hurt, I felt sad and overwhelmed.

I told the therapist, “Tamara did neglect her, because her clothes were too small, her hair was not done properly and her fingernails were always dirty.”

Hector added, “We complained to ACS and they did nothing.”

Confusing Comments

Then the therapist asked about sexual or physical abuse. I said, “I’d have to ask Little Mama. All I know is that she misses her brothers and wants them out of the other house.” I didn’t know if she felt her brothers really were in danger, or if she said those things because she thought ACS might send the boys to our house if they were in danger.

When Lydia came back and started playing with the toys again, the therapist asked her, “How did Tamara treat you?” “Tamara always screamed at me and sent me to be without dinner if I didn’t want to eat,” Lydia said.

“Can you draw a picture of how you feel being away from your brothers?” he asked.

Lydia drew a sad face with tears. I started to cry. “It’s OK, Mommy,” Lydia told me. The therapist ended the session then, telling us that he would let the ACS worker know that he had some

concerns about Lydia's care. I felt relieved that the therapist showed concern about Lydia's well being, but confused about what Lydia's comments really meant.

My Past Rushed Up At Me

After that visit, I felt angry and depressed remembering the abuse I went through in my adoptive home. As a child, I felt that I was just thrown away because nobody loved me. I didn't want any of my kids to go through the agony and humiliation of feeling that no one cared about them.

Thinking about my children's sadness at being separated, all of my feelings of powerlessness and failure came back. Just as I couldn't stop my adoptive parents from hurting my brother, I felt I couldn't protect my children from any pain they felt with Tamara. I felt useless as a mother. I had no control over what happened in my sons' lives because I'd been unable to say no to drugs.

That night, I prayed that my sons could come home to me and I that I could be a mother to them again. I took me a long time to calm down and remind myself that I truly believed that Tamara was taking care of them the best she can.

Betrayed by Everyone

The next day, my husband told me that Tamara had called and was very upset. I asked, "What happened?" ACS had called Tamara and told her that she was going to be under investigation because I made an allegation that Lydia was neglected and abused in her home.

I was very upset. It's not that I trusted ACS to keep anything confidential, but I did not expect that my concerns would be repeated to Tamara like that.

Hector said that he told Tamara I'd never said that she should be investigated or that Lydia had been abused. But Tamara told him that ACS advised her to change her phone number and stop having any contact with me or Lydia. Tamara said she was going to do that immediately.

Cut Off

At that moment I felt hurt and betrayed by everybody—our family therapist, ACS, and especially Tamara. Tamara and I had a friendship, a real relationship. She was like a mother to me. She gave me advice and moral support when Lydia was in foster care. Even though I needed to talk about my fears and frustration with the therapist, I didn't want to hurt Tamara.

That day, I called Tamara's house and left a message with her daughter. But Tamara changed her number and never called me back.

I could understand why Tamara was angry—I know I'd be furious if I thought she put ACS on my case—but I thought she should have asked for my side of the story. She'd so often showed me how to act maturely that I was surprised by her behavior.

Hurt and Sad

The next week, she and Mr. Sanchez were supposed to come to Lydia's first communion, but they didn't come. They also didn't come to Lydia's birthday party a month later. Lydia and I felt really hurt and sad.

Tamara had made a promise that she would be there for us. It had taken a lot of bravery for me to ask her to be our godmother. She and Mr. Sanchez had even promised us money to buy our first communion dresses, crowns and shoes. Lydia was upset every time we practiced for the communion in the house.

Lydia asked me to take down all the pictures of her brothers that we had hung up in the living room. She told me, “I don’t want any bad memories in the house, and I’m mad at them.”

“It wasn’t the boys’ fault. And no matter what, they’re your brothers,” I told her. “But if taking down the pictures would make you more comfortable, I’ll do it.”

We put pictures of Lydia in the frames. But I told Lydia that, when she’s ready, we can put the boys up again.

Trying to Stay Calm

I tried to stay calm and speak well of Tamara in front of Lydia, but privately, Tamara’s actions blew my mind. I felt that it was crazy that she didn’t speak to us. I badly wanted for us to stay connected. I didn’t have anybody like a mother figure in my life besides her. I miss talking with her. I missed her hugs. When someone gives you a hug, you know if they mean it sincerely. Her hugs were so close I felt loved.

The worst part was that Lydia felt rejected by the woman who cared for her for three years and by her brothers. She couldn’t even talk to them on the phone.

I told myself that our three years were a gift, but that maybe I was not meant to have a relationship with my sons. But inside, I wished that Lydia and I could spend time with them again.

Hoping for Closure

For a while now I’ve been thinking of sending Tamara a letter and pictures so I could show her how Lydia has grown and tell her what really happened with the therapist. I would tell her, “I miss you and wish you would contact us. Lydia feels abandoned.” I’d also ask her to help me find

a solution so Lydia could see Tamara and her brothers.

But I’m waiting for Lydia to be officially discharged from care. ACS told Tamara not to have contact with me; I don’t want to get her in trouble, or get in trouble myself, for breaking the rules.

After that day of celebration when my time with ACS is all over, I think I can reach out to Tamara. At minimum, I hope that Lydia can have some closure. She never even got to say good-bye.

Maybe One Day

One day recently Lydia was looking out her bedroom window. I asked her, “What are you looking at?”

“Tamara’s car,” she said. We saw a few boys get out of a white car that looked like Tamara’s. For a moment, I was almost excited. Then we saw an elderly man get out and we knew it wasn’t her after all.

I picked up Lydia and gave her a hug and kiss and told her, “It’s not them.” She had a sad look on her face so I tried to reassure her, saying, “Maybe one day we can see them again.”



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LEADER'S GUIDE

Cut Off by Sylvia Perez

My daughter and I miss her foster parents.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Fear and loss after reunification.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will identify how children may express grief, sadness and fear after reunification.

STORY SUMMARY

Sylvia and her daughter, Lydia, felt very close and connected with Lydia's foster parent during the three years that Lydia lived in Tamara's home. They planned to continue a close relationship after reunification. However, Lydia's behavior after she came home, and accusations that she made about being mistreated while in foster care, led Sylvia to fear that Tamara had harmed her daughter. When Sylvia and Lydia confided in a therapist, both his reaction and the agency's led Tamara to cut off contact.

Sylvia and Lydia felt deeply sad, hurt, abandoned and betrayed—by the agency and Tamara. Sylvia does her best to help her daughter handle the loss, while grieving herself.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about the fear and loss children feel after reunification. Although reunification is a happy event, it's also stressful for children, who often lose their relationships with the foster family, as well as familiar things like the foods, daily routines and discipline style they've gotten used to. Children also come home fearful that the reunion will not work out. Children may show loss and fear through anxious, clingy, angry, demanding or self-destructive behaviors (sometimes following a "honeymoon" period). Many times parents and foster parents blame each other for behavior that actually reflects a normal reaction to grief and fear.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
After she came home, Lydia wanted to be with Sylvia all the time and had nightmares about her foster home.	What fears did Lydia have after she came home? What losses did she experience?
Lydia wanted her brothers home with her and told negative stories about how Tamara treated her and her brothers.	What do you think Lydia was trying to achieve through her behaviors and comments?
Lydia and Sylvia felt betrayed and abandoned by the therapist, agency and Tamara.	Do you think the therapist, agency, or Tamara could have acted differently? Why or why not?
Lydia and Sylvia continue to deeply miss Tamara and the boys.	How do Sylvia and Lydia still feel the impact of Tamara's departure from their lives?
Sylvia plans to reach out to Tamara privately, either to reconnect or to ask for a chance to say goodbye.	What hopes do you have for Lydia, Sylvia and Tamara's relationship in the future?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: **Cut Off** by Sylvia Perez

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were a foster parent, I could help children cope with the losses of reunification by:

2. If I were a parent, I could help my children cope with the losses of reunification by:

3. If I were an agency worker, I could help families cope with the losses of reunification by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *Cut Off* by Sylvia Perez

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

Time to Talk

I'm getting ready to tell my children their adoption story.

By Ruby Awtry

After I retired, I decided to become a foster parent. I love children and I'm patient. I know that children in care have experienced hard times and are looking for a stable home and love.

I also decided to specialize in taking children with special needs. There is a huge need for people willing to open their homes and hearts to these children.

Meeting My Daughter

Nine years ago, on a cold, wet windy day, the phone rang. The call was from my agency, explaining that a little girl needed a home.

That night, my feelings ran away with me. I felt so blessed to know that I was becoming a mom again. Meeting Geneva was like giving birth—not the physical experience, but the joyous emotions.

My daughter and I waited for her arrival. Geneva was so little, only 18 months, with

her hair all dolled up in bows. She was tired and hungry.

When we arrived at our home, it was bedtime. My daughter and I took turns reading to her and holding her as she fell asleep.

Coming Together

Bedtime was difficult for us all at first. We stuck with the ritual of that first night. We hoped it would help her feel secure, and I think it worked. Soon Geneva went to bed with her dolls.

As time went on, Geneva adjusted very well. My dogs Quincy and Suzzie deserve some credit. They made Geneva laugh and showed her love.

At a Christmas party at the agency, I noticed my daughter holding a child while Geneva and I were dancing. I asked, "Who is the baby?" "It's Geneva's brother," she told me. His name was Ronnie, and he was living with

(Continued on next page)

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another foster mom. We were introduced and became good friends.

Ronnie's foster mom was very good about speaking her mind with the agency, reminding them that it was important for Ronnie to grow up with his siblings. Eventually the agency listened to both foster parents and Ronnie become part of our family.

Like Night and Day

Geneva and Ronnie are quite different from each other. Geneva has a very aggressive personality and is full of energy. She is very active and it is hard for her to stay still for very long. She is curious and often asks questions. Geneva loves to make new friends and enjoys playing sports. She is competitive and loves to win.

I keep Geneva active. We travel, go places, attend Girl Scouts and karate, go to parks, and just watch TV together.

Ronnie, on the other hand, is very quiet and most people find him shy. Once he warms up he is warm and loving.

Often Ronnie wants to play by himself whereas his sister wants to intrude in his personal space and force herself into whatever he is doing.

A New Story Every Day

Ronnie and Geneva are considered special needs because of their behavior. Even as babies, their behavior was difficult and different. They are both on prescription medication to help them cope.

With them, every day is an adventure. When most people see my kids misbehave, they are quick to judge. They often tell me, "I don't understand how you can put up with them!" Or they say to themselves, "Why doesn't she just give them back? She doesn't have to deal with that at her age."

To those naysayers I pose the following question: Where would you be if your parent gave up on you? No matter what your children do, you should always let them back into your heart.

Good Moments

The reward for raising special-needs children is that you learn to appreciate every good moment, whether it's that they don't give the teacher a hard time in class or actually go to bed on the first try.

It is a challenge to keep the peace between Ronnie and Geneva. At times I stress the importance of sharing and learning to get along. At other moments I teach them the importance of having your own space and free time.

It's not always easy to keep up with my children. But as they grow older, I see they have become more and more comfortable. It sets my mind at ease to see Geneva and Ronnie satisfied.

"I Will Always Be Mom"

Now my kids are getting of age to explain how they came into my life. This wasn't a conversation I anticipated when I began fostering. Adoption never crossed my mind. But after Ronnie and Geneva had been with me for years, the agency asked me to consider

adoption.

I did my hours of research and asked questions: What will happen to my children if I don't adopt? What will change for us? I decided there was no way I would allow Ronnie and Geneva to stay in the system.

Soon I will have to talk with them about their adoption. This is a very delicate subject. Every child reacts differently to knowing that they were in foster care and adopted. I'm not sure what they understand already.

I will tell them how they came into my life and show them pictures about growing up together. I especially want to let Geneva and Ronnie know how important they are to me. I will tell them, "I didn't bring you into this world, but I am Mom and always will be."

Information and Support

I don't have much information about their birth mom. I was given very little background, only that their mother had issues that were more than one person could really handle, which led the system to remove Geneva and Ronnie from her care.

I will tell my children, "I didn't know your mother. She was unable to take care of your due to circumstances beyond her control."

I also will share with them any information that I can that could help them locate their birth mom, if that's something they want to do. It won't be a problem for me if they are curious about their birth mom.

The Ride of My Life

Like any family, we run into some rough times. But with the grace of God, we make those tough times easier for everyone.

This past July and August, I was hospitalized because I had foot surgery and a finger amputated because of diabetes. The healing process was long and painful.

One afternoon, on a bright sunny day, my children's caretaker brought them to visit me. I was confined to a wheelchair, sitting outdoors and enjoying the beautiful day. Soon I understood how much Ronnie and Geneva missed me. I heard them plotting to wheel me home. They were just waiting for the gated entrance to open so they could push me down Nostrand Avenue.

I was sure that I was about to go on the ride of my life. I kept explaining that I would come home soon, that I missed them, loved them and needed them to be patient. Finally, Geneva and Ronnie understood and let me go.

I was touched by how they showed me how important I am to them and how much they love me, and I felt blessed to be their mom. Their love keeps me ticking.

‘You’re Still Our Mother’

My sons’ adoptive parents helped us have a relationship.

By Anonymous

My three older children went into care when they were 10, 8, and 2 years old. Before my addiction took over, we were a strong family. Every birthday they had a party, every Christmas they had gifts and every Thanksgiving we had dinner on the table.

My sons were smart and very handsome. My oldest son would always help me out with his brothers. He did well in school and football. My second son stayed under me. Where I went, he went. It was very hard for him to start school. My third son liked to make things with his hands.

I gave my children what they needed but underneath I felt lost. I was a young mom who was confused about life. I knew I had to take care of my children and love them, and I never wanted my children to feel unloved, like I did when I was a child. But I couldn’t give them as much as I wanted with nothing inside.

Medicating Myself

When my oldest son was 8, I started smoking PCP. I tried to stop and I did at one point, but my hurt and pain led to my addiction. I medicated my feeling with drugs and lost my children to foster care.

About a year after they went into care, I stopped doing PCP and I began to visit my children. The agency saw that we loved each other. During visits I made sure we played football, I took popsicle sticks and glue to make things, and I always brought something like a teddy bear for my second oldest. The agency would let me take them out to eat and sometimes to the park or just for a walk.

For a while, I was doing everything I was supposed to and I even had weekend visits with my sons. But I did not stay away from people, places and things that reminded me of drugs. One day, I started smoking crack.

Soon I was not visiting my children and they could not come home on weekends anymore. While on drugs, I had one child after another, four more boys, who all went into foster care straight from the hospital.

Two Foster Moms

My oldest boys were in the same home. The foster mom, Ms. Smith, did not like me when she learned I had other children in care. I heard her say it to her daughter, “She got the nerve. She already has children in care and she keeps having

babies that keep coming into the system.”

I never said anything back to her because this person was taking care of my children. But I thought, “Who is she to judge me? I come to my visits, bring things for my sons and have fun with them.”

During visits, I felt nervous. If I touched my son, what was this lady going to say—that I hit him? That’s how this foster mother made me feel.

‘Don’t Judge That Mom’

My younger sons were placed with two other foster mothers. One was with a foster mother I barely met. My four youngest were with Ms. Perez, who never spoke badly of me. She told me from the beginning that she would never keep my children away from me unless I was high. During visits, she helped me get to know my sons. At bedtime, she would tell my boys to pray for their mother.

Luckily, Ms. Perez sat down with Ms. Smith and said, “Don’t judge that mom. She is a human being who made a mistake in her life and doesn’t need that added pressure.”

I was so touched. I said to myself, “This is a person that doesn’t even know me and made me feel like a person. She didn’t put me down like my family and everybody else.”

After that, Ms. Smith became more open to me. She began to say hello to me at the visits, and I felt like I did not have to watch my step anymore. I said to Ms. Perez, “Thank you so very much.” She said, “It’s only right. You’re still their mother.”

I Saw My Children Fade Away

But during this time, I was still getting high. I

didn’t always visit. I saw my children slowly fade away from me.

At the next court date, the agency said, “We are moving forward with the termination,” I felt I had nothing to live for. My children were gone. The judge said, “You no longer have the right to be in your children’s life.”

My solace was that I knew my boys were in good hands. But after the termination, I started to resent the foster mothers. Now they would be my children’s mothers? I resented them so much I would not even call. For a long time, I did not see my children. I continued to use to make the pain go away.

My Heart Fell Out

Six months after the termination my oldest son called and said, “The foster parents are going to adopt us.”

At that moment my heart felt like it fell out. I had an empty feeling. I could not catch my breath.

But I was blessed. Their foster mothers told me, “Whatever happens, you’re still their mother. You can have phone contact, pictures and visits. As long as you’re not high, you can visit.” That made me feel like I lost the battle but not the war.

‘Look Inside Yourself’

A year later, I got my addiction under control. I went to treatment. My counselor said, “The more you put in this program, the more you will get out of it.” So I began talking about my addiction and losing my children. I found out I was not the only one. My groups helped me with my pain.

When my peers in treatment found out that six of my sons were living with kind, thoughtful foster parents, they said, “You don’t have to resent them. Look inside yourself. Learn to love yourself and forgive yourself and you can see life a little better.”

Making the Call

By then, I hadn’t seen my children for at least a year and did not know what to say to them. My counselor said, “What do you want to tell them?”

“I want to say I love you,” I said.

“Go make your call,” he told me.

I was so thankful that the numbers were not changed.

I called Ms. Perez first. When I said hello, she said, “Thank God.”

“Is everything OK?” I asked.

“Are you OK?” she asked, and I said yes. Then she put the boys on the phone.

“Mommy, are you better?” they said.

“I’m getting there.”

“We miss you so much.”

I told them that I loved them and that I would ask if they could come see me.

My sons said, “Ms. Perez said you’re still our mother.” I felt my heart come together after it was broken for so long.

Family Day

I called Ms. Smith next. Believe it or not, I felt a lot of love from this lady from the start. She said, “I knew it would happen one day.”

She asked me, “When would you like to see your children? I will bring them to you.”

“They are having family day on Sunday. Can you come?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about that,” she said.

That was on a Tuesday. I could not sleep until Sunday.

‘You’re Still Our Mother’

On Sunday, Ms. Perez came through that door with my children. My oldest two were 16 and 14 years old. The youngest were 10, 9, 8 and 7. They were still very good looking. The oldest was taller than I was. When I saw my sons, the only thing I could say was, “I’m so blessed to have you in my life.”

I cried so much that my oldest son, Kevin, said, “Look at you, you’re wetting up your clothes. Why are you crying like that, Mommy? You are still our mother and it’s going to be all right.”

That was wonderful to hear. I knew that was what the foster mothers had taught them. I was so blessed. I was whole again.

I went and hugged Ms. Perez and I said, “I love you very much.” They’d bought me cards that they’d made and some roses. Until today, that’s the only flower I like.

A Wonderful Visit

During our visit, we ate McDonald’s and we had beef patties, chicken and fries, cake and ice

cream. I found out that all of them were still doing very well in school. The oldest didn't play football anymore, it was all about the girls and the computer. My second son still loved to have something to hold on to.

The four youngest were happy-go-lucky little boys who liked to write and spell and think about what they were going to be when they grow up. They liked to go to the park to tease girls and go to birthday parties.

Kevin said he was going to be a doctor. He said, "When my mother gets sick again I am going to take care of you."

At the end, Ms. Perez said that she would call my counselor to find out the next time we could visit. Believe it or not, I was not sad when my children left because now I knew that as long as I took care of myself, everything else was going to fall into place.

A Circle Once Again

After that visit, I had two visits with my children at my program. Once again, Ms. Perez kept her word.

When I was able to go out on my own, I was so afraid, because I had made that program my safe haven. But I called Ms. Perez to ask if I could come to visit the children. "Yes, and if you would like to take them out, you can do that, too," she said. We went to the park and had ham and cheese sandwiches, chips and apple juice. Ms. Smith, the other foster mother, also told me that if I wanted to, I could visit at her home. The circle was coming together.

Dark Spot in the Circle

The only dark spot in the circle was my son James, my third son. James had been placed by

himself with a foster parent who told my son that I did not love him, that I was on drugs and did not want him.

Over the years, we didn't develop as close a relationship. Then, when James was 10, he told me on the phone what the foster mother had said.

He said terrible things to me: that he was better than me, that he would never speak to me again and he did not want me in his life. He said, "You're a crackhead who did not love her children, or you would not have done that to us." I never got a chance to respond. He hung up the phone.

After that, my son never talked to me again.

Telling the Truth

Amazingly, my children did not know that I used drugs because Ms. Perez and Ms. Smith chose not to tell them. They said that I was sick and that when I got better I would come back. Ms. Perez said that it was up to me to tell my children the truth.

After my treatment, I told my boys about my addiction. I told them, "There is something important that I need for you to know about me and why I was in a program. I used to use drugs."

"Drugs?" they said. "Ms Perez always said you were sick."

"Drugs will make you sick," I replied. "I could not take care of my family. But I always loved you."

"We know that," they said, and I started to cry.

My oldest said, "Why would you use drugs?"

"I was not happy with myself, I did not know what I wanted out of life and a lot of things happened to me when I was young. Using drugs just made things worse. I lost my family," I said.

"We were here all the time," he said.

"You are a very smart young man," I said.

"Please never make the mistakes I did. You have people in your life that love you and will help you though anything."

Rebuilding a Family

Now my oldest sons are 34 and 32. They do very well for themselves. Both are computer specialists. The youngest four are in their 20s. Somehow they all went to school for teaching, that's how close they are.

Every year, my sons come over on Mother's Day, and we take turns going to each other's houses on holidays.

After I got clean, I had two more children, a son who is now 16 and a daughter who is 13. It felt good to take care of my two children and not have child welfare in my life.

I think my youngest son feels left out when his older brothers come around, maybe because they always say, "We have a special bond. You just don't understand." My daughter loves it, though. She tells everybody, "I have eight brothers." And I'll tell you what, the boys stay away from her.

I am so happy to have my sons in my life. I am only sad that my son James still won't speak to me. He does talk to his other brothers. There is a little empty space in my heart for him. I pray and I'm hopeful that one day we will all be together again.



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LEADER'S GUIDE

'You're Still Our Mother' by Anonymous

My children's adoptive parents helped me have a relationship with them.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Maintaining a connection after adoption.

ACTIVITY GOAL

Participants will understand how children and parents can remain connected despite adoption.

STORY SUMMARY

The writer was unable to recover from her addiction until after her rights were terminated and her seven sons were adopted. But two of her children's foster parents let her know that she could always have a place in her children's lives if she was sober.

When the writer got clean in treatment, she reached out to the foster mothers and was able to begin visiting her sons again. Although she never regained custody, the writer was able to reassure her sons that her addiction was not their fault and that she loved them and wanted to be part of their lives. Years later, they still see each other on holidays and feel like family.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we'll talk about how children can remain connected with their parents after adoption. Children who are adopted may have mixed feelings about contact with their parent. At times, they may feel curious and long for a close relationship; other times they may feel angry and abandoned and want distance. Adopted children typically go through these emotions whether or not they have contact with their parents, but contact can help children understand why they were adopted and feel reassured that their placement in foster care was not their fault. Foster parents can help children by speaking positively about the parent and facilitating appropriate contact.

- Does anyone have a question about this topic before we get started?

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Remind participants about important moments in the story and ask them to reflect on the motivations and behaviors described in the story.

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
The writer felt judged by two of her children's three foster parents.	How did one of the foster parents help her feel comfortable?
The writer showed her children love during visits but was not dependable.	How might you feel toward the writer if you were her children's foster parents?
After termination, the writer went to treatment and reached out to her sons.	What do you think was positive for the boys about visiting their mother?
The writer remained in contact with her sons but did not raise them.	What do you think was difficult for the boys about visiting their mother?
As adults, the boys maintain a connection with their mother.	How do you think it benefits the boys to be in touch with their mother?

REFLECTION: 30-45 minutes

Through writing, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences and what they've learned. Hand out the "Group Reflection" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs.

To promote self-reflection, hand out the "Personal Reflections" worksheet. Participants can share their responses in the group, in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

GROUP REFLECTION: 'You're Still Our Mother' by Anonymous

Let's reflect on what we've learned from this story and consider how the topic relates to our own experiences and roles. Take a few minutes to jot down your responses on this sheet and then we'll share our responses with the group.

How did the story affect you? Choose a few sentences to complete.

This reminds me of... _____

I can't really understand... _____

I could relate to... _____

I was surprised... _____

I noticed... _____

I'm concerned that... _____

I hope that... _____

What have you learned? Write down your suggestions.

1. If I were an adoptive parent, I could make a plan (or legal contract) to keep the children connected to the parent by:

2. If I were a parent, I could make a plan (or legal contract) to keep my children connected to me by:

3 If I were an agency worker,, I could help the parent and adoptive parent make a plan (or legal contract) to keep the children connected to the parent by:

PERSONAL REFLECTION: 'You're Still Our Mother' by Anonymous

How does this story relate to you—your relationship with your child's family or foster family, or your role as a support to parents and foster parents? Use the questions below to consider how the story relates to your own experiences.

MY ROLE

How has your thinking changed since reading this story?

What do you feel excited about or concerned about after reading and reflecting on the story?

ACTION STEPS

How can you use what you learned from the story? Please write down a few steps you plan to take related to your role as a parent, foster parent, or child welfare staff,

1.

2.

3.

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