

Planning Ahead: Working Together for Successful Interactions

Think of the last hard day you had—at work or at home. One of those times when you didn't want to talk about your day, but your partner asked anyway. Or the opposite—you really needed someone to listen, but your support person or partner was unengaged or absent.

At times, kids in care will experience those same feelings you have—especially after they return to your home after spending time with their family. It can seem like no matter what you do, it's the wrong thing.

So what can you do to help make the transitions to and from families run more smoothly? It may seem somewhat obvious in hindsight, but one thing you may want to do is make sure you've prepared *before* children spend time with their family.

Preparing for Family Interactions

If you and the birth family don't already have some guidelines in place for shared parenting, preparing for visits is a great place to start. This can include ideas such as maintaining similar schedules, rules, and discipline as much as possible, as well as information about food and medications and any health concerns. (Also see our [tip sheet on Shared Parenting](#).)

You're not always going to agree on everything and that's okay too.

Other suggestions include:

Names. Talk with your child's birth parents about what name you are called. Some children in foster care call their foster parents "Mom" and "Dad," which can come as a surprise to birth parents. This is an important topic of discussion that foster parents and the child's birth parents should have in order to avoid hurt feelings or confusion for everyone.

Family Interaction

Form.

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families has a helpful resource you can use regarding family visits called [The Family Interaction Plan](#). (Your social worker might have a form that he or she uses

from his or her agency.) The DCF plan is a short, simple form that helps everyone stay on the same page in regards to transportation, times, places, who can have contact, proposed activities, what each party's responsibility is, and a section for comments.

Well Stocked Homes. Having clothes, toys and toothbrushes at both houses greatly reduces the stress of packing and potential complaints if something isn't sent to one home or brought back to another. Pharmacies will also put meds in separate containers so that

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both sets of caregivers can have medication on hand.

Phone Numbers. Some foster families send a laminated card with phone numbers that has contacts for both the birth family and the foster family, as well as their respective community and family members. (And, of course, human service numbers and other emergency contacts.)

Sharing Information with Others. It's usually helpful to let at least one key school staff know if children are spending time with their families so that they can be prepared for any potential behavioral or emotional fallouts. It is also important to inform therapists and others the children might see regularly about any upcoming family interactions.

Calendars. One Wisconsin foster parent shared something that was effective in her home: "For the kids who are old enough, I have them make a calendar and we mark all the special days on them (visits, birth family birthdays, etc.). It helps them stay more connected, and they will spend less time asking when they see Mom next."

Along those same lines, one birth mother made a pad of sticky notes so that her kids could rip off a page each day until the next time they saw her again. Each sticky note also had a nice message on it.

Building Connections

If it's a shorter or supervised interaction, you probably don't need to do anything at all. But you can still check and see if anyone wants you to call and/or be nearby.

For longer times, it might be helpful to call or

text once a day just to check in. This is also something that would be good to talk about at a team meeting so that everyone's on the same page and so the children and their family don't feel like you're intruding. This is their time together, after all.

Most kids have conflicting feelings and loyalties between their parents and foster parents. They might be very loyal to their parents, but still might be apprehensive around them.

One Wisconsin foster family has a code word of "train" so that if the kids aren't feeling safe, they can call their foster mom and use the word "train" in a sentence.

After the Visit

It's sometimes tricky finding the fine line between listening to what happened during

their time with their family and not grilling the children about all the details. If they don't feel comfortable about the visit right away, let it go and bring it up later. One youth in care prefers to wait until bedtime before she talks about her experience spending time with her family then she'll usually say, "Okay. Do you want to hear about the whole weekend?"

Sometimes you have to prepare yourself to let kids be emotional or angry and not take it personally. (Even though, of course, it feels *very* personal when the children won't get back into the car with you while they're screaming to be with Mom.)

Some other tips include:

Routines. Most parents stress that it's important to get the kids back early enough to settle into the rest of the daily routine. Mid-afternoon is usually a good time, with both families

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agreeing to be flexible if something comes up.

Rituals. One family started a new tradition when the child in care wanted to both comfort her mom with a teddy bear and also wanted to be comforted by her mom’s smells. They started trading two bears back and forth, so that the mom and the daughter could each have a bear.

Other people use blankets, t-shirts, or toys to trade back and forth. And some children and parents sometimes trade a journal back and forth—even if your child is too young to write, he or she can draw pictures and the parents can write messages.

TV, Movies and Books. Spend time together when kids in your care return to your home by watching a television program or movie together. You might also read a book together—perhaps something that has special meaning for the child, birth parent and foster parent.

Communication with the Child’s Therapist
One Wisconsin foster mom talked to the therapist about her concerns that Gavin cried excessively after visits and it was hard for her, as the parent, not to be able to do anything to help soothe him.

“It was comforting for me to know that the therapist didn’t have all the answers, either,” the foster mom says. “She said, ‘well first of all, we don’t even know why he’s crying, right? Is it just that Gavin wants to be with her or is there something more behind it? Is he scared that she’ll use drugs? Go to jail? Get beaten up?’ ”

After the foster mom, therapist and Gavin all talked together about transitions from home to home, the therapist and the child came up with a “Changes” form (see previous page) for him to use.

Changes

(developed by a child in care and his therapist)

1. Today is _____
2. Right now I feel...
Mad Scared Happy Worried Sad Excited
3. Why I feel this way....
4. The best thing about going back...
5. The thing I’ll miss most is....
6. One thing that makes me feel good when I’m back is....

“That form is amazing,” says the foster mom. “I’m not sure why it works so well, but Gavin looks forward to filling it out and it takes some of the intensity away.”

Playing Social Worker. One foster family talks about how the children would play “social worker” after a visit. One child was the social worker, another was the foster parent and another was a teacher. “Sometimes I would play along,” the mom says, “And this was a good opportunity for me to ask questions about things we wouldn’t otherwise talk about.”

Transitions Do Get Easier

Just like when we’ve had a hard day, it’s not always going to be easy for our partners or family to know how to help us, and the same is true of children in care.

Even if we become frustrated, somewhere we do recognize that the people around us just want to help us. Children will understand that too. It may take time, but when you try to include the child in coming up with solutions, it’s likely you’ll find a way to make transitions go more smoothly.

While many of the

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ideas in this tip sheet are written with younger kids in mind, many of the ideas can be modified for teens. Plus, even the toughest teens sometimes still like to take comfort in things that younger kids do.

Feel free to contact us at: 800-947-8074 or info@wifostercareandadoption.org.



Resources from the Coalition

- [*Foster Parent Handbook, Chapter 4: Developing & Maintaining Family Connections*](#)

Other Resources

- [Family Interaction Plan](#)
- [Changes in Children's Behavior Before and After Parent Visits](#)



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