

You Hold the Missing Piece of the Puzzle: The Importance of Documentation

It can be puzzling to figure out how to provide the best care for children and youth in care. The birth family, therapist, judge, Court Appointed Special Advocate, guardian ad litem, and the team of social workers each hold pieces to this puzzle.

You have an essential piece of the puzzle. You have the best opportunity to get to know the child on a day-to-day basis. As you get to know this child, your observations provide basic, but important, information to the therapist, judge, and social workers as the permanency plan for care unfolds. The best outcome occurs when all concerned parties are aware of a child's needs and work together to meet those needs.

Observing a child's behaviors and sharing that information is part of fostering. Keeping a written record of your observations helps foster families keep an accurate account of day-to-day pieces of information.

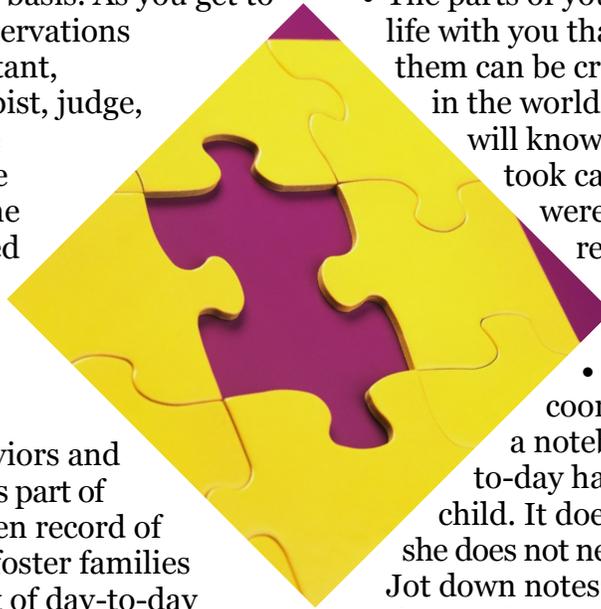
The following are reasons why you may want to record your information:

- Your account of a child's behavior and progress may be used in court and affect important decisions about placement and care.
- Your records may protect you when there are allegations of abuse and neglect.
- The child's therapist uses your

information to form therapeutic plans.

- Your case worker can help you address issues and work with the child if you have accurate descriptions of her behaviors and interpersonal relationships. Caseworkers may be able to make the best determinations of a child's needs if they have a clear picture of what is happening in a placement.
- The parts of your documentation of their life with you that you can share with them can be critical in anchoring them in the world as they grow up. They will know where they were and who took care of them even if they were too young or anxious to remember, the placement was not long, or it had an unsatisfactory ending.
- One Wisconsin coordinator suggests keeping a notebook or journal of the day-to-day happenings in the life of the child. It doesn't have to be formal and she does not necessarily want to see it. Jot down notes. She has seen families use these written records in court.
- Dates are important. Record specific activities, like dental appointments, doctor's appointments, and school information. Home visits are important to record. Keep records of crises and challenges with dates.
- A Wisconsin foster parent e-mails her observations to the social worker, therapist and others on the team, which allows the same information to be shared in one step. She

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also includes the birth parents if they have email.

- Many families start a file for each child so that the journal and the other papers are together. It is easier if you have your information in one place.

Or you may want to keep your journal on your computer with a secure password. Some agencies may have policies against keeping files on a computer, so check with your worker if you choose to keep electronic records.

- If you think a behavior is noteworthy, write it down. Let your social worker know about it, even if it may seem insignificant.

As you keep your notes, keep in mind, too, that any information you document and share with legal parties or the case manager are added to the official file and could potentially be shared with the child's birth parent(s).

Most importantly, keep confidentiality in mind. Use passwords with your computer and get a locked filed cabinet for your notes.

The following are some suggestions from the social sciences field about how to observe and record information about the child in your home. Keep these questions in mind:

1. **Where?** What is the setting in which the behavior occurs? Is it in front of the TV, in the car, or at meals?
2. **What time of day?** Does the behavior occur before or is anticipated after certain activities take place? Does it happen when home visits are coming up or following home visits?
3. **How often?** What is the frequency of behavior? Is it several times an hour, or a day? Count and record the number of times it happens.

4. **How long** does the behavior last, over hours or over days? How many days in a row does it occur? What is the duration of behavior? The frequency and **duration** of a behavior helps determine if there is a pattern to it?

5. **What have you done?** Have you tried to stop a disruptive or harmful behavior or reinforce positive behavior? What have you tried to do to either intervene or encourage what the child is doing? Did it help?

6. **What is the impact of the behavior?** How does it affect the child or others? How do others react to the behavior and to the child when the behavior occurs?

How you feel is important, but what the child *does* is the first critical piece to bring to therapists, the court, and to the team.

Let's look at two examples.

Joel's behavior can be described in two ways. You might say:

Breakfast is awful because of Joel. He is surly and just plain ornery in the morning. I get so frustrated because we are late for school and work. He makes us late all the time.

Or you could describe what happens:

Joel gets up on time, dresses and gets ready for school. But he has not eaten breakfast since he came. He stands by the wall and raps under his breath. Does not talk or look at anyone. On three days this week, he spent 15 minutes on the toilet before school. We have been late for school and work on three days. I sent him to school with a granola bar each morning. It's hard on all of us.

Here is another example of describing the behavior of Kendra

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in two ways. You might say:

Kendra is perfect. She is so cute and fun to have. Great student, too. Takes perfect care of herself. I just love having her here. She has a great personality but seems a little nervous.

Or you could describe what happens:

Kendra helps around the house, keeps her room clean, does her homework and earns A's and B's. She takes a shower everyday, does her hair and make up appropriately. She answers when we talk to her and tells us she likes it here and that we are nice. She asks for nothing. Calls us "Mom and Dad" from the beginning. We do hear her awake and moving around her room at night. She puts her bitten fingernails under the table or behind her to hide them. She rocks herself and hums when she thinks she is alone.

Describe behavior, then your reactions or opinions. Most of us would guess that Joel does not want to go to school and Kendra wants to stay at this home. But both guesses might be wrong. By telling the actions of the child, you give the team information to work with.

Let's consider Tanya, an 11-year-old girl, who saves food in her room. You allow all of your children to take food or drinks to their room for snacking. But you found a store of it on Tanya's closet shelf.

Here are things you can note and share with the team:

- Did she eat the right amount of food for a child her size?
- When does she take this food?
- How often does she take food?
- What does she actually have on her shelf?
- Does she eat it?
- Does she take it on a regular basis or does she only do this at certain times?

- Is she secretive about it or does she share her food and knowledge of her stash with other family members, friends or you?

At a team meeting, you also might want to ask what information other team members would like you to document. Sometimes you might actually be documenting too much information, causing stress for you and the other teammates. You and your family, after all, have a right to be just that—a family.

You acquire important information about all children who come into your home. You see their behaviors on a daily basis. When all of the pieces fit together to form an accurate picture of a child's needs, the healing of the child is much more likely.

Sharing your observations with the birth family and listening to what the birth family is able to share in return also helps to build a united front so that kids see a team of people who are there to help them. These observations help to make the picture—and hopefully the relationships therein—whole.



Resources

[***New Law Strengthens the Role of Foster Parents in Court***](#), by Regina Diehl, J.D. The National Advocate for Children, Spring, 2007

[**Behavioral, social, and emotional assessment of children and adolescents**](#), by Kenneth W. Merrell

You can read more about sharing information in the [**Wisconsin Foster Care Handbook, Chapter 2**](#), pages 4-10.



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