

While You Wait



ADVOCACY TOOLS FOR PROSPECTIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

APRIL 2005

Honoring a Child's History

As you prepare to become a foster or adoptive parent, it is important to think ahead about how you might deal with a foster child's past relationships to birth parents, extended family members, and former foster families.

Although children in foster care may have experienced neglect or abuse, most also have positive memories of their birth families and other early life relationships. Not everything about their life was bad. They may remember a loving touch, a kind gesture, or a special birthday,

and they may wonder about siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Children may wish their parents were healthier or had made better choices. They may even understand they can't safely live with their birth parents, but that doesn't stop children from having deep feelings for them.

The children you agree to foster or adopt may need you to listen when they talk about memories of their birth families. They may ask for your help contacting family mem-



bers through letters, cards, phone calls, or—if it's safe—visits.

The following pages include the thoughts and perspectives of foster, adoptive, and kinship parents who share their experiences and offer tips on how to honor a child's past.

Helping Children Respect Their Past



Barb Fischer believes that contact with birth family members and former foster parents can be healing for a child. She also believes it is important to show respect for birth parents so that their children can continue to have respect for them and respect themselves.

Fischer is an adoption and foster care trainer for the state of Minnesota, a MN ASAP liaison, a licensed foster parent, and current kinship and adoptive parent. She strongly believes that—as long as it is safe—it is her job to help her children have some form of contact with their birth parents or former foster parents. The Fischers have ten children, including a sibling group of three who were adopted from the foster care system and two who joined their family through kinship adoptions.

Fischer notes, "Our sibling group was able to hear from their birth mother. She wrote: 'I really love you, but you belong where you are,' and that was really helpful. Our children wouldn't believe us when we told them [their birth parents loved them], but when it came in writing, my son said, 'Wow, she really does love me.' He couldn't believe it until he had it in his own hands," says Fischer.

"Each of our children responds differently to their birth parents," adds Fischer. "But I believe overall it's a positive experience, even though it can be difficult at times. It helps answer a lot of their questions and doesn't leave them hanging."

The Fischers' 21-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter's birth mother has a severe mental illness. Fischer solicits help to prepare the birth mother for visits and to assist with the actual visits. Fischer has noticed during the visits with her son that the severity of his birth mother's illness limits her ability to track what is going on or to understand that he has been adopted permanently. "The visits do matter to her and she does know he is her child, and yet she isn't able to connect with him in a way that is very meaningful," adds Fischer.

Fischer confides that her son is dealing with his own anger about his birth mother. She says, "Sometimes he'll see her and sometimes he won't. We encourage visits at least once a year, which satisfies her and is really all they both can handle."

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Fischer's daughter has also learned how to relate to her birth father. "She likes to see him even though there's not a lot of give and take because of the severity of his mental illness. Their relationship does matter to both of them, and her dad is able to share information about his past and express his concern for her," says Fischer.

This daughter has also asked to meet her paternal grandparents. When their daughter's birth father didn't arrange a visit, Fischer and her husband decided they needed to go ahead and set it up. They believe if they wait until their daughter is an adult and can initiate contact on her own, chances are that her grandparents, who are already quite old now, would not be alive.

"We encourage our children's birth parents to write during the year. I also take pictures and drop the doubles in the mail frequently," Fischer explains. "I jot



information on the back to help the birth parents feel connected. Last year I learned that Birth Mother's Day is the day before Mother's Day, which I thought was really cool. We picked out Mother's Day cards that were appropriate to honor the birth mothers in our lives because they are important to all of us."

"We have not had good luck getting [former] foster families to maintain contact with our kids and that has been a frustration and a huge loss for my kids. We can't get them [to respond to] written contact or anything," says Fischer. She points out that some children have spent more time with foster parents than they did with their birth parents, and in those cases the foster parents know more about the children's early lives.

"The sibling group we adopted includes two children who had multiple [foster] placements. Not one of those

families is willing to share any information; not a photo, not a letter, nothing," exclaims Fischer.

Fischer would like foster parents to understand the importance of their role in a child's life. She believes foster parents have a responsibility to share the history of each child's time spent with their family.



Fischer laments, "I wish more foster parents could meet my kids and understand the pain they feel for not having [access to] those pieces [of their past]."

One of the Fischer's daughters was placed in foster care at birth and lived with a foster family for six weeks. Fischer says, "She wants to know more about those six weeks. My daughter has this little lamb that she came [to us] with, and she wants to know where it came from and who gave it to her," adds Fischer.

"I get the impression that it may be too emotionally hard for some foster parents. Maybe when a child moves on it is too painful for them and they just want to shut that door and lock it," she concludes.

Fischer thoughtfully adds, "I was reading recently that having contact with birth family members is certainly not the answer to everything, since it can bring up more issues. And yet my preference is that my kids are able to know the answers to some of their questions and are allowed to start adjusting to some of their truths while they're still young, instead of forcing them to essentially go through it all at once when they are adults."

Fischer concludes, "I try to be aware of my own motivation. I believe in telling children the truth and I also care about my children's birth parents, but I need to make sure my children's best interests come before my care and concern for the birth parents. With each interaction, I ask myself: 'Who am I doing this for? Whose best interest is served here?' The answer always has to be my child." ♥

Learning from an Adult Adoptee



Mary Martin Mason is an author on adoption topics, an adoptee, and an adoptive parent. Adopted as a toddler, she was periodically allowed to see her birth father and ask him why she was adopted. She could ask as many times as she needed—as a young child, a pre-teen, a teenager, and an adult. Mason says there is nothing that can take the place of having an adopted child's questions answered by the birth parents.

Although it is now common practice for most private adoptions to be open, open adoptions from the child welfare system have only recently been explored. Mason notes, "Current research shows that the outcomes for foster children greatly improve when they are allowed to have safe contact with birth family members and others who have played a significant role in their lives."

"The research showing that children have better outcomes when they are given access to birth family members should not be ignored," says Mason. "Children need to know their family heritage because part of their identity comes from their family of origin. In fact, children are at a disadvantage when their lineal heritage is taken away from them because they are missing a key aspect of their identity." Mason explains that lineal heritage is a person's genetic and historical connection to family members, tracing back to ancestors.

Mason adds, "Children have the right to maintain linear integrity and foster and adoptive families need to be respectful of birth family members. Some families have lost their linear integrity for many generations because they were entrenched in the foster care system.

A birth family is connected to a birth child for life whether the child ever sees them or not. The connection does not go away, and imbedded in that family is the child's truth."

Mason explains, "When you deny children their family, they grasp onto what they know—which are usually the negatives." For example, children from foster care often focus on the shame of being removed from their family for serious reasons. "They lose all the richness and depth of their family history. The depth is always there, but buried and lost to them," she says.

Mason adds, "We are beginning to re-think whether children's ties to their birth family need to be completely severed. We are realizing that if birth parents cannot parent their children, maybe there are other family members who can, and that all family ties do not have to be severed."

"When it is impossible or unsafe to have contact with birth parents, go to the next level, the next family member, such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents. One of the most natural and important family contacts to support is the relationship between siblings. Siblings can help each other process the past and share childhood memories and family information," suggests Mason.

Fear of birth families can keep foster or adoptive families from encouraging contact between children and their birth families. Mason adds, "We all have family members we have more contact with and family members we may not see at all. We all make choices about whom we spend the holidays with and whom we choose to babysit our children. This is normal for all families." Mason encourages families to keep an open mind and help their adopted children have safe contact with birth family members so that they can learn more about themselves.



A Rural Family Includes Birth Family Members



Connie Hesse and her husband Jerry are adoptive parents to three sons and a daughter, and legal guardians to another daughter. Their family lives in rural Minnesota where they have learned to balance loving and raising their children, with maintaining contact with their children's birth parents.

One of Hesse's pet peeves is people who judge birth parents for somehow failing to raise their children and allowing them to slip into foster care or be adopted. She knows how illness, a troubled upbringing, alcoholism, and a multitude of other reasons can cause parents to lose their right to raise their children. "No one has the right to judge them," she says. Living in a rural community, Hesse knows that people need to be careful about what they say about others. Word can spread, hurt individuals, and damage relationships.

Hesse lives in close proximity to some of her children's birth parents and extended family members. "My kids go to school with their biological cousins. They know them. If we are out and we see them, they are not introduced as their biological cousins or anything like that, but my kids know who they are and where they came from," she explains.

The practice of encouraging foster and adoptive placements in a child's community means that some children may live near their birth family members. Hesse says that their family has dealt with lots of different situations where they run into family members. Once when they were at the fair, they ran into a birth mother and one child wanted to approach her and another child walked around a ride to avoid seeing her. These are things the Hesse family discusses with their children and has learned to deal with.

Hesse adds, "Our children who do have contact with their birth parents do not have to deal with physical safety issues. The birth father to one of our sons, however, was convicted of incest with his daughter and he is not allowed to have contact with our son. Because we live in a small community, [our son] needed to know about this and know that it doesn't make him a bad person."

The same son successfully initiated a first visit with his maternal grandparents. Hesse explains, "A few years ago just before Grandparents' Day, we were in



Walmart and he said he wanted to meet his grandma and grandpa. We told him 'Maybe someday.' Then he showed us a little cup he had picked out for them." The Hesses knew they needed to arrange a visit.

The grandparents lived only 14 miles away, so one Sunday afternoon the Hesses called and asked if they could visit. "Now these people are elderly, and very, very poor," says Hesse. "When we arrived we saw that the uncles had taken all the other grandkids away so it could be just us. Our son was in awe meeting his grandma and grandpa. He gave them little gifts, looked around, and we took pictures that I have put away for him. We haven't heard a word about it since, but I think we were able to fill a void for him at that time."

The Hesse family has made it a practice to consider the dignity of all people as they help their children grow in the understanding of their personal truth.

This is the 12th in a series of newsletters for Minnesota prospective foster and adoptive parents produced by the North American Council on Adoptable Children's Minnesota Recruitment Project, funded through a grant by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

We encourage you to reproduce and distribute this newsletter.

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