

TOPIC: Boundaries and Touch in Foster Care

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Micro Training Course Developed by
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INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOSTER PARENT TRAINING CREDIT:

**Read through this self-study.*

**Fill out the "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING" Questionnaire*

**Return to ACRF for 1.0 hour of training credit.*

Healthy families know the power of touch with children. We snuggle babies and massage them. We hold toddlers on our laps and tickle them. We rough-house with our older children and tuck them into bed with good night kisses. We even hug and kiss our teens (if they let us!) Touch is essential to infant survival and science proves daily hugs can contribute to good mental health. Nurturing touches between parent and child rely on one truth: *an adult takes responsibility and makes sure the touch is appropriate and respectful, not exploitive or harmful.* Adults set the boundaries, not the children.

Many children coming into foster care have had family member who did not take responsibility for those boundaries. Children may have been inappropriately touched, manipulated, sexually touched or used, forced to sexually touch others, been physically abused or verbally assaulted. Basic needs, such as food, sleep, structure, and safety may have been neglected. Children learn not to trust someone will take care of them or know what to do. Children may grow up not believing that the adults in their world have their best interests at heart.

Here is one of hard parts of fostering— the normal nurturing part of living in a family is not something our foster children have experienced. *And we have to adjust our parenting accordingly.* This is what we mean by trauma informed parenting. Children develop their view of the world based on what they grow up with. If you grow up with trauma and threat, abuse and neglect, you see the world as not being safe. Foster care offers a place for children to begin healing. Healing foster families actively help children gain a sense of **felt** safety—children truly begin to feel safe in the world and to trust the people around them.

So when the world of nurturing family touch collides with the world of a child or teen who has experienced exploitative or abusive touch, foster families must proceed gently and mindfully both for their own protection and the felt safety of the child. Our foster children need and sometimes crave or hunger for touch from caring adults. But children can misinterpret touch as being sexual, manipulative or uncomfortable. If you blunder forward with thinking that, of course, children will know that this kind of touch is different than what they have experienced before, we can actually cause children harm and possible re-traumatization. Or if you vow "I will never touch a child in my care just to be safe," children and youth are deprived of nurturing touch needed for healthy development. They might actually seek it elsewhere in unsafe ways. How does a foster parent find a middle ground? You should be guided by three principles:

ONE: The adult in the home is responsible for setting and enforcing boundaries in a loving, caring but instructive way. No one should get hurt and no one should be shamed.

All of your actions should be mindful, respectful, and totally above board. Good intentions aren't enough to overcome the associated trauma—you need to be aware of how a child interprets your actions.

1. Watch for "emotional hot spots" such as bedtime or wakeup, bathroom activity, and touching between parent and child. Waking a child up with a kiss in the morning might have been fine for

your birth children, but may take on a different feeling in foster care, especially with older children and parents of the opposite sex.

2. Learn to talk to all your children about appropriate touch and inappropriate touch. Follow up on situations with children where there is hurtful or inappropriate touch. Show your children that their physical safety and comfort is of utmost importance to you and it is your job as a parent to keep them safe.
3. If inappropriate touch originates with a child-- avoid shaming children. Separate out the behavior from the child and focus on what is okay and what is not okay. Seek help from professionals if you are looking for guidance of how to talk to kids or think a child needs more assistance.

TWO: Foster homes should have house rules that establish comfort and safety for all family members.

Take extra care around sleep, bathrooms, dressing, touching, issues. Follow strict guidelines about all family members dressing appropriately around the house or going in and out of the bathroom. Make sure everyone knows the rules and has appropriate clothing such as bathrobes or pajamas to wear. Doors should be closed when dressing and respected by others. Kids should sleep in their own beds. No hurtful touch should be allowed at all.

THREE: Children and Youth need touch and physical affection. Don't stop showing affection or providing nurturing touch. But proceed carefully and mindfully.

You should avoid intimate touching, prolonged full body contact, or touching that might be intrusive to a child. Be aware of a child's history and be especially respectful during the sensitive years of adolescence. Take it slow and build trust.

1. Give as much control as you can to the child about his body. One strategy is to ask for permission, wait for an answer, and watch for the child's reaction. "I'm so proud of you for getting the award in school. Can I give you a hug for congratulations?" Watch the child's reaction and take cues from the child "No? Well that's okay. How about a high five instead? Good job!"
2. Sneak in as many healthy and nurturing interactions as you can. Show love in ways other than touch. Be nurturing with your words, smiles, friendly notes, and eye contact. Find ways to provide lots of good physical contact that is safe to vulnerable children: high fives, pats on the back, sidehugs or buddy hugs, kisses on the hand or the top of the head, brushing hair, or wrapping up a child with a warm blankets from the dryer.
3. If you have a child who himself has problems with touching others, set firm guidelines but avoid shaming. Be matter-of-fact when stating the rules and give a child something better to do. "Remember our rule about no touches that hurt? If you want something, use your words, Bobby." "Remember the bubble! Don't go into your brother's bubble or touch him without his permission." "Sara, it is not okay to touch the private parts of your sister when you are playing together. Bring your toys in here and play in this room with me. Thank you."

You may need to learn new words to work with kids in a trauma informed way, or have a more structured household, or even interact with kids in a different way than you are used to. Look to your child's therapist or contact us here at the Alaska Center for Resource Families.

The 3 Guidelines

Adults are responsible for setting boundaries

Establish house rules for comfort and safety

All children and youth need loving nurturing touch, but proceed mindfully.