

SELF-STUDY COURSE

Understanding the Birth Parent

October 1998

3.0 Training Hours

This self-study was developed and updated utilizing materials from sources quoted and credited in the text. These include:

- Dealing with the Natural Parent Curriculum developed by Pat Ryan of the University of Michigan, 1978.
- Working with Biological Parents by Charles Horejsi, SIPS, Publication #5012, American Foster Care Resources, 1985.
- The Importance of Natural Parents to the Child in Placement by Dr. Ner Littner in Our Foster Child's Natural Parents.
- Information Packets: Visitation with Birth Parents, Domestic Violence and Its Effects on Children, and Working With Birth Parents, Available from the Alaska Center for Resource Families.

This self-study was developed and revised by Aileen M. McInnis of the Alaska Center for Resource Families.



**Alaska Center for Resource Families
815 Second Avenue Suite 202
Fairbanks, AK 99701**

1-800-478-7307 or in Fairbanks: 479-7307

www.acrf.org



UNDERSTANDING THE BIRTH PARENT

Part One: The Birth Parent

Why would someone not take care of a child? Why would someone use drugs or alcohol during pregnancy if it would hurt their baby? Why would someone continue to live with another person who she suspected of molesting her child? Who are these parents who gave birth to the children in our care?

Probably nothing is more confusing to foster parents than these questions. There are no easy answers to why people abuse or neglect their children. It is clear children are hurt by abuse, neglect and abandonment. But what would cause someone to do this to a child is not always as clear.

Who Are the Birth Parents of the Children in Our Care?

There is no one characteristic that accurately describes the birth parents of children in the care of OCS. Some are stressed by sickness, death and separation, and put their children into care voluntarily. But most of our foster children are in care either because of abuse or neglect, or because their parents are either unable or unwilling to care for them any more. The causes of violence or neglect toward children are many. They involve internal factors, such as childhood experiences, addictions and mental health. They involved external factors such as support systems, violent relationship, and poverty. Following are some general observations based on what we have discovered about birth parents of children in foster care.

Eighty percent of the cases OCS investigates involve drug or alcohol abuse.

Without a doubt, an overwhelming characteristic of birth families is the presence of a drug or alcohol addiction. Alaska's high alcoholism and drug use rate permeates many aspects of our population's lives, but no where is it more damaging than in families. In these families, the addiction must be addressed if children are to be safe. Many of the parents with children in foster care are also in treatment programs, both inpatient and residential and may have points of relapse in their recovery. Mothers who use drugs or alcohol, and have partners who also abuse, are at high risk for giving birth to children who have been drug exposed or alcohol exposed during pregnancy.

Many parents are involved with domestic violence.

The National Woman Abuse Prevention Project found that children in homes where domestic violence occurs are physically abused or serious neglected at a rate 1500% higher than the national average in the general population. Being abused or battered was the single most common factor among mothers of abused children. Violence is often a family affair. In addition, a study by Lenore Walker in her book **The Battered Woman** found that mother were 8 times more likely to hurt their children when they were begin battered than when they were safe from violence.

Shaken Baby Syndrome is often inflicted by very young parents, many of whom are male.

“Shaken Baby Syndrome” is a condition where a young child has received permanent injury to the brain as a result of being shaken, a blow to the head, or an accident. It often happens as a result of a parent shaking a young child or baby out of frustration, such as in the response to incessant crying. Research shows that there is a higher incidence of very young parents or caretakers causing Shaken Baby Syndrome, especially in male caregivers. The combination of frustration, immaturity and poor parenting skills or knowledge increases the risk to the child.

Birth parents may suffer from an untreated mental illness, especially depression or psychosis.

Parents may struggle with untreated mental health problems that may cause them to hurt or neglect their children. Depression is especially prevalent amongst parents of neglected young children, and has also been found to be present in mothers of children who are victims of incest. Bi-polar affective disorder (manic depression) is a disorder that causes people to swing between being “high” to being very depressed. Other mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and psychotic episodes, involve hallucination and paranoia and can pose a great risk to children if left untreated. Some psychotic episodes may be drug or alcohol induced.

Birth parents have often been abused themselves as children.

Repeatedly we see violence and neglect handed down from one generation to another. Often birth parents were abused, neglected or molested as children. This may affect them both physically and emotionally in terms of how they learn to parent children. Parents who did not get their needs met as children, still have these needs as adults. They often cannot put them aside and see that their children have the same needs to be cared for. Instead of seeing that a baby’s cry means he is hungry or has stomach pain, a parent may interpret it as a child doesn’t like the parent or is spoiled or is too demanding. Poor impulse control or poor parenting skills are recurring themes in adults who abuse their children. Often parents of sexually abused children (both offenders and non offenders) have been molested in their childhood. Recent research shows that early abuse and neglect can affect the development of the brain, so that child abuse may also have a biological basis as well as an emotional one.

Some birth parents are themselves victims of Fetal Alcohol Effects or Syndrome.

Where do children who are alcohol affected go? They become adults, and since FAS and FAE can result in permanent brain disorder, these disabilities are carried into the realm of parenting. A child with problems with memory and cause/effect, may be a parent who has children while she is still young, and may have difficulty with what seems like the common sense of parenting. This may be challenged even further if the mother also continues to drink and gives birth to a child with similar affects. Parenting will be an overwhelming challenge without a strong support system. This poses a great challenge to caseworkers trying to work with both the parent and the child.

Birth parents are often very isolated from healthy support systems.

Parenting a child is a stressful job. Many of the birth parents of children in foster care are overwhelmed because of economic struggles, challenging children, and unsupportive environments. Parents may be raising children alone, without a partner and without a healthy extended family. This factor, combined with a past history of abuse, presence of domestic violence, or addiction, or a challenging child, often leave a parent without the skills to handle stress.

Environment and challenging demands of children can push fragile parents into abusive patterns.

It is important to remember that the child and the environment are also important factors of why abuse can happen. An environment that is unsupportive, violent, poor in resources or healthy supports, or not healthy for a family's basic needs causes more stress to a family. A child who is hyperactive, overly sensitive, has special physical needs, is developmentally delayed, or has a difficult temperament or behaviors can push an already fragile parent over the edge. Children never deserve to be abused. But some children demand more from their parents. Healthy parents can adjust and find supports to help them. But fragile parents, or parents with any of the above listed characteristics may find themselves turning their frustration on their children.





UNDERSTANDING THE BIRTH PARENT

Part Two: Separation and Loss Issues for Parent and Child

When well-intentioned people become foster parents, many see themselves caring for a child who needs a parent. Experienced foster parents know that every child who comes into foster care already has a parent. Birth parents loom large in the life of a foster child, even when there is little contact between them. When birth parents stay involved with a child, the foster parent needs to consider how visitation will be handled and how communication will take place. When a birth parent loses contact with a child, foster parents still need to deal with the spoken and unspoken questions of a child who may feel abandoned, ashamed or may glorify his birth parent.

Foster parents will have varied levels of actual contact with birth parents. However, every day you care for a child who has a connection and identity with another parent besides you. It is important to have a realistic view of birth parents. It can also help you figure out why sometimes parents, and children, do and say things that on the surface, may not make sense.

How Do Foster Parent Feel About Birth Parents?

Why do foster parents often have negative feelings about birth families?

- ⊖ They are upset by the way the birth family has treated or currently treats the child.
- ⊖ They are upset by the way the birth family treats the foster family.
- ⊖ They are concerned about the child's reactions to the foster family.
- ⊖ They are concerned with the failure of the family to plan for the child.
- ⊖ They are frightened by the birth parents and what they might do.
- ⊖ They feel the values of the birth family conflict with their own.
- ⊖ They fear the outcome if the child is returned to the birth family.
- ⊖ They hope to keep the child with them.
- ⊖ They feel competition with the birth family for the child's affection.

Is it ever okay to have these feelings? *Yes.* It is perfectly normal and understandable. The crucial point is whether or not these feelings of frustration get in the way of helping the child and family. Many people can successfully get their feelings out and deal with them, then return to the task and go on.

How can foster families handle feelings of disappointment, anger and frustration about birth families?

1. ***Set reasonable expectations for yourself and the birth family.*** Don't get hooked into fantasies that we can rescue the child's family or make things right. Celebrate small changes and successes.
2. Try every now and then to ***put yourself in the birth parent's shoes.*** Ask "how would I feel if..."
3. ***Seek support*** of other foster parents. Building a healthy support system for you and your family will help you keep balanced.
4. ***Talk it over with the caseworker.*** If we are involved as part of the worker's plan to help the birth family, we are a valuable resource and deserve some of the worker's time and energy.
5. ***Take additional foster parent education classes*** or do some reading on your own.
6. ***Set aside time for yourself,*** to feel refreshed, relaxed and satisfied with the rest of your life. Take a break for a day or a weekend.

FROM TRAINING CURRICULUM: Dealing with the Natural Parent

Separation From The Foster Child's Point Of View



How do children feel about being separated from their parents? Children in foster care typically move through a series of stages when separated from birth parents.

1. SHOCK
2. PROTEST
3. DESPAIR
4. ADJUSTMENT

CASE EXAMPLE OF SAM

“When Sam first entered foster care, he hardly said a word. He watched everything and did as he was told, but rarely initiated a conversation except to ask, “Where’s Mommy? Visitations were very difficult and Sam would often cry almost hysterically at the time it was to part. As months went by, Sam began to show more negative behaviors and throwing screaming fits and toddler-like tantrums. These gave way to silent times again, but this time, Sam seemed depressed and withdrawn from what the family was doing. He did not seem to care about his visits from his mother. Through regular visits with his mother and gentle support from his foster parents, Sam’s good nature returned and he seemed to find a special place in the foster family.”

Studies have shown that when efforts are made to encourage and enrich the parent-child relationship, there is better success in the child's social and emotional adjustment and better possibility of the child's reunification with his family. If birth parents are not involved with their children, and not involved with the planning for their child's future, often times the child's future lies with foster care, often drifting from home to home, confused and conflicted about the relationship with their parents.

Separation From The Birth Parent's View

What would be a typical reaction if your child was taken from you and placed in foster care? Think about it. If your child was taken from you, what would you feel? The birth parent will probably have similar feelings. Children go through stages of separation and loss when placed in foster care. Birth parents go through the same feelings.

SHOCK Wonder if your child is being taken care of. Shock that this is happening to you. Feeling outside or distant from the world. Not really feeling -- acting like a sleepwalker. Difficulty in paying attention or listening.

PROTEST Sadness, anger and physical upset. Increase use of cigarettes, alcohol or drugs. Lots of anger -- at the courts, at the social worker, at the foster parent, at your child. You resent your child for making you go through all this pain. Perhaps anger and fear results in avoiding the child and the caseworker. Some paranoia that everyone is against you.

DESPAIR Depression sets in. Loneliness. Apathy. You may not get out of bed. You feel worthless. Perhaps even suicidal. You may try to get away from despair by trying a new life -- trying a new job, new social outlets for better or worse, having another child. You separate from your child in order to get away from the feeling of despair.

ADJUST You become more realistic in what you can and cannot do. You begin to pay more attention to yourself, the house, the rest of the family. You take your agreements with the social worker more seriously. You feel physically better and your relationship with your child seems more relaxed. You either become resigned to doing what you have to do to get your children back, or resigned to the fact that you will never have your child back again.

Pat Ryan (1978) identified four points that should be remembered by all foster parents in their work with the parents of children in foster care.

1. Placement of a child in foster care triggers the birth parents' grief process. It may also trigger memories of all the previous losses so as to overwhelm or immobilize the birth parents.
2. Birth parents have usually had a heavy pattern of loss prior to the placement of their children. These losses may include loss of a home, loss of a job, death of a parent, and desertion by a spouse. When people experience too many losses too close together they may lose their ability to adapt and cope.

3. Many birth parent behaviors which appear strange or annoying can be easily understood in terms of the grief process. At a certain stage of grief, people have difficulty remembering things and can't follow through. Does this explain the unkept appointment? At another stage of grief, the mourner becomes angry at everything. Another common response to grief is excessive drinking or other substance abuse.
4. It is part of the foster parent's job to help the birth parent reconnect with the child. If the grief process is allowed to go full cycle, the birth parent might disconnect, "let go" and stop trying to get the child returned home.

How Loss and Grief Affects Behavior of Birth Parent	
<i>Birth Parent Actions</i>	<i>What It May Mean in Terms of Loss and Grief?</i>
1. Appears for a visit with liquor on breath	Dulling senses so he/she can face pain of seeing child in better home
2. Doesn't appear for a scheduled visit	Inability to face child. Confusion or forgetfulness. May be in denial of separation or withdrawal
3. Tells the child to forget about him or her	Despair. Loss of hope. Feelings of self-blame. Frustration. May hope the child will give reassurance he still loves her.
Claims there was not legitimate reason for the child to have been removed from home	Denial of situation and own inadequacies.
4. Criticizes the way the foster parents care for the child	Anger at the separation is displaced on the foster parent. Only way to feel like he or she has some control over parenting the child
Blames the child for being in care – "If you had only..."	Anger/Inappropriate expectations for child.
Telephones at 2 a.m. wanting to talk to the child	Insomnia, restlessness, agitation, searching behavior.
5. Says to the foster parent "You should just keep him, I can't do him any good."	Despair, Loss of hope. Hope for reassurance. Hope to escape by denying responsibilities. Resolution of grief by disconnecting from child.

Perhaps you are thinking, *“I know that Jimmy’s parents are very important to him, but I can’t help disliking them. Is that wrong?”* On one level you understand that this relationship is important. On another level, it is difficult for you to encourage that relationship.

These are five reasons -- there undoubtedly are many others -- why foster parent’s may resent the child’s birth parents, may see them as a natural enemy or even wish to exclude them completely from the child’s life.

1. Some birth parents have severe emotional problems. They may be uncooperative, unpredictable, and inconsistent. They may show up at inconvenient times, or early or late or sometimes not at all. They may return the child to the foster parent’s home at the wrong time. They may be argumentative, critical or drunk. They may unrealistically promise the child anything. They may be sabotaging the foster parent’s best efforts. They may treat the foster parents like hired help. They may show up with a different boy or girlfriend each time.
2. Their visits with the child may result in a temporary worsening of the child’s behavior and function. The child may become quite tense prior to the visit and extremely upset and unhappy and difficult to handle after the visit.
3. The child may worsen the situation by attempting to play the foster parents against each other. He does so, of course, as one way of trying to deal with his own inner emotional problems.
4. When the foster parents are clearly aware of how the child has been emotionally damaged by the birth parents, it is difficult for foster parents to be friendly with the birth parents.
5. Finally, because foster parents are normal human beings they may have personal problems of their own. All of these feelings may contribute to their feeling excessively competitive with the birth parents and needing to depreciate them in order to feel better about their own handling of the child.

“Why Natural Parents are Disturbing” by Ner Littner, M.D.,
The Importance of Natural Parents to the Child in Placement



UNDERSTANDING THE BIRTH PARENT

Part Three: Visitation and Communication

CASE STUDY OF SALLY

Sally was placed at the age of four and a half. Her parents had separated some time before this with no one ever knowing what became of the father. The mother, a promiscuous woman, entertained frequently at home even before her husband left her. A breezy, flashily dressed person, she continued to have a succession of lovers after his departure.

Sally, no doubt, had seen much of the intimate affairs of her mother. However, she adjusted fairly well to her foster home, was sweet, dependent, never a real problem. To everyone's relief the mother visited rarely. The child seldom commented or asked about her after the first period of adjustment. The social workers rarely mention the mother to the little girl, while the foster mother did so only on the occasions when she expressed her disapproval of the mother's visiting.

At fourteen, Sally became boy crazy to an alarming degree. The foster mother discovered some notes written by the girl which in her opinion were both vulgar and seductive. The comfortable years of placement in this foster home come to an abrupt end. No one will ever convince the foster mother that her years of care she gave were not thoroughly wasted.

One important item was missing from the "all we've done". That was giving the little girl a chance to talk about her mother. She should have been not only allowed but encouraged to ask questions, and to speak of her. Someone should have acknowledged to her that of course she loved her mother. Once the child learned that no one would condemn her for wanting to love her mother, she could be encouraged to talk of her resentment and anger over the fact that her mother had let her down, had failed to be the kind of mother that she should have been. Talking would have released some of the tension associated with these two feelings and left the child freer to pattern her life after that of the foster mother.

Adapted from Almeda Jolowicz, Source Book of Teaching Materials on the Welfare of Children
Council on Social Work Education.

The Role And Importance Of Visitation

Some feelings of separation can be lessened if the child can talk about them at the time of placement. When he is able to do so, these separation feelings will bother him less. However, many feelings about separating are so painful that the child is unable to face them and so ventilate them. Instead, he buries these feelings in his mind and represses them. In other words, the child may have problems with his foster parents because his repressed feelings about his birth parents may color the spectacles with which he views his foster parents.

Placed children frequently are upset after a visit with their birth parents. This upset behavior may be due in part to the birth parent's tense or traumatic handling of the child. But usually most of

the child's upset behavior after the visit is due to the fact that the act of seeing his birth parents again triggers the child's repressed separation feelings about the parents. That is why it is so important for the visits to take place. It's not that we want the child to be upset, but rather because we want to help the child get as much of his repressed feelings off his chest as possible. The more emotionally disturbed the child is (the more problems he has prior to placement), the greater will be his difficulty in ventilating his separation feelings.

Ongoing contact with his birth parents give a child continuing opportunities to see them realistically. When a child is in foster care, he can develop highly irrational feelings and fears concerning the birth parents. The contacts are needed to keep demonstrating to the child what his birth parents are really like. The child is not the only one who has unrealistic fantasies about the birth parents. The foster parents also may visualize them in a completely illogical manner. These unreal fantasies can be kept under control by regular contacts between the foster and birth parents.

Visits can also calm some the child's irrational separation fears. For example, one can tell a placed child repeatedly that his birth parents are still alive even though they do not visit him; he probably won't believe what he is told. But if he is able to actually see them, this particular fear is more easily dealt with.

Another benefit from visits occurs when birth parents are able to re-establish their family. It is rather difficult for a child to fit into a family where he has become a stranger. It is much easier when the child has been able to maintain some form of an ongoing relationship with the other members of his family.

From Ner Littner, M.D. The Importance of Birth parents to the Child in Placement

Deciding Upon The Visitation Schedule.

Many people, including the parents, guardians ad litem, counselor and parent's attorney may give input into when visitation should begin, but ultimately the caseworker is the one who decides, unless there is a court order that specifies visitation. When planning a visit, the focus should be on making visitation comfortable for all parties involved. That means preparing the child for the visit, talking to him about how long, how often and when visits will be and what will happen on the visits. It means providing privacy for the child and birth parent as well as provision of games, toys or activities to reduce the tension.

Where the visits will take place also needs to be considered. If visits take place outside of the foster home, the birth parent is not forced to compare her home over the foster home. But visiting in the foster home gives the parent an idea of how their child is being cared for. The child may feel more comfortable. Visiting in the birth parents home also helps both parent and child feel more comfortable and is preparation for eventual reunion. Sometimes visits need to be supervised, and may need to take place at OCS or at an agency. All these need to be considered to decide what is best for the parent and child. You need to give your permission before visits can take place at your home or before your phone number can be given to a birth parent.

Visitation is also important between siblings. If at all possible, sibling groups should be placed together. If sibling groups have been split up, foster parents will need to plan with each other and the worker to give the children time with each other. Foster parents should insist on sibling visitation unless there is convincing reason against visitation in the case plan.

What Are Some Of The Problems In Visitation And How Can Each Be Handled?

The following questions are often asked by foster parents.
The answers were given by a group of foster parents in Michigan.

1. *Birth parents don't come when expected or are very late.* Comfort the child. Explain to parents the need for a schedule. Call to remind them. Re-schedule to a more convenient time if appropriate. Explain to them how very important visitations are for the child.
2. *Birth parents come when not expected or at inappropriate times.* Explain the importance of a schedule. Set future time for visitation as soon as possible.
3. *Birth parents make unrealistic promises or even lie to the child.* Re-interpret. "It would be nice if..." "Mommy would like to..." Do not accuse parent of lying or say, "That's not true."
4. *Birth parents are angry or abusive to the foster family.* Ignore if possible. Set limits. Firmly state rules and enforce them. "We do not talk that here. I will have to ask you to leave if you continue." If necessary, get caseworker to intervene or be present.
5. *Birth parents are angry or hostile with the child.* Foster parents should intervene only if it is prolonged or becoming dangerous. Reinterpret. "When Mommy is angry, she says things which are hurtful." If frequent or extreme, get social worker's assistance.
6. *Birth parents ignore the child.* Be sure parents have adequate privacy to interact freely with the child. Set up games or toys. Ask the child to serve tea. Comfort child later.
7. *Birth parents behavior is as if drunk or on drugs.* Ignore if possible. Give coffee. Set limits. Ask to return when feeling better.
8. *Child doesn't want to see family.* Get the child to talk about it. Explain obligations. Get social worker's help.
9. *Child is sullen or won't talk.* Ask the child to talk ahead of time. Involve the child in games, serving coffee, etc.
10. *Child fusses and won't let birth family leave.* Firmly hold the child, explaining the parent will leave and will be back. Reflect feelings. "It's really sad to see Mommy and Daddy leave."
11. *Child behaves badly before or after visit.* Reflect feelings. Give appropriate alternative behaviors to express feelings. Set and maintain limits.
12. *Birth parent disrupts foster family relationship.* Discuss with each other within the family. Share feelings. Make plans. Set limits. It may be helpful to discuss with worker. If problem becomes serious, seek counseling. (Caution: It may be best to handle family problems outside of the agency.)

How Can Parental Involvement Be Encouraged?

Pat Ryan of the University of Michigan offered several suggestions for increasing and maintaining parental involvement.

Include birth parents in:

- ◆ School conferences or “Parents’ Night”
- ◆ Clothes shopping
- ◆ Planning for a child’s behavior change
- ◆ Decisions on what toys or equipment the child needs

Help child with:

- ◆ Making birthday cake or giving a birthday party for birth parents
- ◆ Make or buying gifts for birth parents
- ◆ Taking photos of child with birth family to give to parents
- ◆ Showing parents grades, awards, etc.
- ◆ Writing letters or notes to birth parents and relatives
- ◆ Remembering Mother’s Day and Father’s Day
- ◆ Maintaining contact with siblings in other foster homes

Involve birth parents in:

- ◆ Child care tasks when the birth parents are visiting in the foster home, (bathing, feeding, tucking in bed).
- ◆ Ask birth parent about schedules, food preferences, etc. of the child.
- ◆ Attend parent education classes with birth families
- ◆ Suggest resources for housing, clothing, transportation
- ◆ Invite the birth parents to dinner
- ◆ If the parents are without transportation, help arrange it or drive the child to them.
- ◆ Give the birth parent a birthday or Christmas gift from you, not the child.
- ◆ Work with birth parent on making a family tree or scrapbook of photos and mementos for the child.

Communicating With Birth Families

There are no special rules for communicating with birth families. Honest concern and caring work with birth families just as they work with others. What really counts is the feeling, the tone of the voice, and the actions that convey the meaning of helpfulness. The following suggestions come from foster parents who have asked and answered the questions below.

“How do I ask for information about the child without sounding nosy?”

- * “Could you tell me a few things about Johnny to make it easier for him while he’s here?”
- * “Since you’re Johnny’s mother and you know him better than I do...”
- * “I hope you can help me make Johnny as comfortable as possible while he’s here by giving me a few pointers on what he likes to eat and how to handle bedtime.”

“What is reflective listening and how do I do it?” Reflective listening is giving a response that conveys understanding of the feelings expressed.

Statement; “I just don’t like the idea of someone else taking care of my child.”

Response: “Sounds like it’s hard for you to think about Johnny being here.”

Statement: “I just don’t know how I can face Christmas without the kids. That was a time we were always together.”

Response: “Yes, Christmas can be a lonely time without your family.”

Statement: “I tried to get a hold of the social worker three times and she never called me back.”

Response: “It’s frustrating not to have your calls returned.”

“How can I set limits?” It helps when setting limits, to give the reason for the limits and provide an alternative or option.

- * “It’s time to wind things up now because it’s late and we have to get the kids to bed.” (Would you like to tuck Kevin in?)
- * “I’m sorry, but we can’t re-schedule the visit for a later time today because we have to be somewhere else.” (Can we set up another time right now?)
- * “I can’t let the kids go home with you right now because it was my understanding with the social worker that the children were to have their visits here.” (Would you like to give the social worker a call?)
- * “I really don’t want to have a disagreement with you, especially in front of Jimmy. It is upsetting enough for him to be separated from you. Let’s drop it right now for Jimmy’s sake.” (Can we set a time to get together and talk it over with the social worker when Jimmy isn’t around?)

“How can I say nice things when I’m feeling negative?”

Foster parents are human, too, and should not be expected to be phony or dishonest. Some alternatives are: 1. *Be polite* 2.,*Be matter-of-fact or businesslike* and 3. *Be direct*.

- * “I’ve had a rough day myself and this is hard for me, too.”
- * “I don’t agree with you. It’s hard for me to accept that, but I know you have a right to your opinion.”

Look hard for positives. Catch the parent doing something, anything right that can be commented on *sincerely*.

- * “Johnny seemed so relaxed when he sat on your lap.”
- * “That blue sweater makes your eyes look so blue. It’s really attractive on you.”
- * “I really appreciate you coming on time today. I know it’s not easy to get transportation and it probably took a lot of effort coming on the bus.”

“What if the parent tells me something and asks me not to tell the worker?” It is really important to establish from the beginning that you have a teamwork relationship with the caseworker. If this isn’t sufficient, one of the following statements might be adapted.

“Wait a minute! There’s a whole lot about you that I don’t know, and that’s okay because I respect your privacy. All I really need to know is what affects Judy and how I can help get her back home with you. You don’t need to tell me the rest unless you want to. I can’t promise to keep secrets from the worker. If you do want to tell me things, you’ll have to understand that I keep the worker informed about the kids and my visits with you.”

“Please don’t tell me those secrets you mentioned. I can’t promise not to tell the worker because I’m a foster parent, and keeping her informed is part of my job.”

“I’m probably not the right person for you to tell these things to because I have a responsibility to report back to the agency. If you really need to talk about them, why not try your counselor and check to see if he can keep these things confidential.

Communication with Birth Parents (From Appendix C: Dealing with the Natural Parent Curriculum)



TEST