

TOPIC:

Tips for Setting Up Good Communication with Your Foster Child's Team

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Micro Training Course Developed

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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.

TIP #1: Know who the members of your child's team are. The primary players will be: their OCS caseworker, Guardian ad Litem (GAL), and the child's birth parents. The OCS caseworker may be an Initial Assessment worker (if the case is new) or a Family Services worker, called a Protective Services Specialist. Additionally, there may be others who make up the team. This might include: your licensing worker, Indian Child Welfare Act worker (ICWA worker), mental health/medical professionals, and/or a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). Contact information for these important people should be included in the child's red placement packet. If not, call OCS directly in your region to obtain the name and contact info for your OCS caseworker. The caseworker can provide you names and contact info for other team members as well.

TIP #2: The resource parent will be communicating with a child's team in several ways. **Being prepared is key to setting up good communication habits.** Let's break down a few ways to be prepared for these different interactions.

- During home visits:** OCS caseworkers are required to visit the foster home at least every other month when a child is in placement. Having information available about recent medical, dental and any therapeutic needs, education updates, family contact information, and any other important information that needs to be shared, will help the visit go more smoothly and efficiently. You can also email your caseworker ahead of time if you have specific questions that he or she may need to seek advice or assistance about before the visit.
- At Court Hearings:** Resource parents can attend court hearings scheduled for the youth in their home. Try to attend in person, and if not, let your caseworker or GAL know in advance that you'd like to attend by phone. Come prepared with update information similar to that listed in the home visit section above, as sometimes the attorneys or judge may ask resource parents if they would like to share any information about the child.
- Meetings/TDMs:** Depending on the purpose of the meeting, you may need to come with information about upcoming appointments (medical, mental health, family contact, etc), as well as update information about how the child is doing in the home.

Know what each team member does!

Protective Services Specialist (PSS) The OCS employee who monitors the case, serves as the team coordinator and acts as the case manager of a child who is in OCS custody. The PSS is the resource family's main contact at OCS.

Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) This position is appointed by the court to represent the best interest of the child and make recommendations to the court. Every child in OCS foster care should be assigned this person who is supervised by the Office of Public Advocacy.

ICWA Worker This person represents the tribes when making child protection decisions about tribal children in accordance with the federal law passed in 1978, called the Indian Child Welfare Act, put in place to protect Native families and communities by requiring states and child welfare departments to follow a specified preference when placing Native children in out of home care and notifying tribes when tribal members and families are involved.

Licensing Worker An employee of OCS or an individual of an organization responsible for evaluating a foster home/foster group home or child placement agency and recommending approval or denial of a license. Every foster family should be assigned one.

TIP #3: Resource parents are encouraged to prepare for possible high stress or emotional meetings in advance.

- d. Make a plan. Write down the important information that needs to be communicated during the meeting so that you don't forget if emotions run high.
- e. Give yourself permission to take a moment. Set the tone for the rest of the team if a question is asked of you that needs a thoughtful response. It's okay to tell everyone "I need a moment to consider this," or to request a short break to collect your thoughts and feelings.

TIP #4: Talk with your team about their preferred method of communication. Do they prefer email, calls, or text messages? Below are a few ideas about how to navigate email, calls, and texts with professional teams.

- f. Phone Calls: Try to call early in the morning (7:30 am to 9 am) before caseworkers, GALs, and other team members are caught up in the busy of the day. If you need to leave a voicemail, be very specific, speak clearly and slowly, leave your name and repeat your contact information. Ex: "Hi Caseworker, this is Jane Doe, calling to talk with you about 'child initials' recent school suspension. You can call me back today after 2:00 pm or any time tomorrow. My phone number is 907-907-9079. Again, this is Jane Doe and that phone number is 907-907-9079."
- g. Email: Email is a great way to keep all team members on the same page about things going on with a youth. Remember HIPAA though! Request from your team their direct secure messaging or DSM email address in the event that you need to send information that would be protected under the HIPAA laws via email. There are two types of emails you might send:
 - i. Update emails keep the entire team notified and aware of what is going on with a youth. In the subject line you can write: "Update on 'youth's initials', no need to reply". This lets the team know there is info included, but a response is not necessary. These emails should be short, bulleted, and professional. They should not include diagnoses, identifiable medical information, or names that could identify the youth in question, unless these emails are sent to the worker's DSM email.
 - ii. Request emails are the other way to communicate with team members. Much like update emails, these should be short, bulleted, and professional. Additionally, request emails should be specific, as well as allow the recipient time to meet the request. In the subject line you might write: "Request for out of state travel permission and assistance with purchasing airline fare". In the body of the email you might note that your family is planning a vacation out of state in a few months. You'd like to start purchasing tickets and would like the caseworker, GAL, birth parent, and other important team members to review the request and provide guidance on how to coordinate travel plans with the permissions from all parties.
- h. Text Messages: Remember HIPAA protected information should not be transmitted over electronic means unless it is secure. Keep texts short and to the point and if detailed information needs to be shared, either call or use the caseworker/GAL's DSM email for communication of protected information.



TIP #5: Understand the chain of command. All workers, despite their role, have a supervisor to help them navigate their work duties. Supervisors are a great resource when communication issues start, as they can provide their worker with support and guidance before bigger problems arise. When you first meet your child's GAL, caseworker, ICWA worker, etc. ask them who their supervisor is and how to contact them. Additionally, you should always attempt to correct a concern with the worker directly. When you are not able to solve the problem, including a supervisor is a good next step. Often, supervisors may not respond directly to you, but may reach out to the worker to provide guidance. It's important to give supervisors time, usually a day or two, to meet with their worker to help.

TIP #6: Finally, all systems are multi-layered. **Recognizing that your caseworker, GAL, and other team members may not be able to approve or consent to things on the spot** will help ease frustrations. When there are finances involved, releases of information about a youth, travel approvals, or approvals for things like certain medications, often these decisions require supervisory review and approval. Remember to allow a few days for responses for requests like this. It is ok to send a follow up email/call if you have not heard back in 2-3 days.
