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Building Bridges
Linking foster and biological parents for the sake of the child
By Colin W. Morris

When foster parents decide to care for a child, it’s often impossible to know all of the facts about the child’s history. The experiences of foster children are complicated, and, especially when domestic violence has or is occurring—it can be tough for a foster parent to know how to handle it with their new child. For foster parents, reaching out to a biological parent can sometimes provide a window into the child’s past, as well as their future.

Communication between all involved improves a child’s chance for positive, healthy development.

Clarisse,* a foster parent for almost twenty years, reminds all parents that there is a support system in place for them. “There are a lot of people around that want to help,” she says. “We can all be an extended family.”

Let’s face it: Everyone involved in the foster care system needs support. Communication between all involved—foster parents, children, case workers, and biological parents—improves a child’s chance for positive, healthy development. But it’s not always easy. It can be especially hard for a foster parent to build a relationship with a child’s biological parent because reaching out is a very sensitive matter. It raises many issues—some of which leave biological parents feeling uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, building a relationship can prove essential for a child’s overall well-being. Many children react positively to their biological parents and foster parents working together, whether it’s towards reunification or just to mend a damaged, difficult situation.

When it comes to establishing trust between foster and biological parents, Clarisse suggests being honest with the parents and to avoid judgment. “Open up about yourself. Confide in them. Let them know what your role is,” Clarisse says. “Let them know that you’re open to whatever they need to share.”

Putting the biological parent at ease can open a lot of doors. Janice,* a foster parent who has cared for teenage mothers, stresses that making time for a biological parent has benefits. “I think when you sit down face to face with them in a room, and you realize that they’re a real person and a real human being, it just changes the dynamic.”

Sometimes during visits, Janice noticed that the biological mom was still being abused, and Clarisse describes a situation where she encountered an abusive dad. “During the times the biological father would accompany the mother on supervised visits, the mother seemed closed and wouldn’t speak much with her child,” Clarisse remembers. “When he wasn’t at the visit the mom would communicate with me—it would be a very nice visit for her and the baby,” she explains. “But when he came she wouldn’t even look at me. She was afraid.”

It’s important that foster parents—already in challenging positions—see the value of reaching out and addressing issues of abuse. If abuse is present, the biological parents may not be able to reunite with their child.

It’s crucial that foster parents are aware of the services available for domestic violence victims and feel comfortable referring a mother to such services.

Tips for Foster Parents:

- For your safety and that of the victim, talk to her one-on-one, away from the child, and always away from the abusive parent.

- A simple way to raise the issue is to say: “I am worried about you. If you need someone to talk to, you owe it to yourself to call the domestic violence hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). They can provide you with local resources that can help.”

- Let her know that the violence is not her fault and that she’s not alone.

Foster parents are in a unique position to not only show biological parents ways that they can work together on behalf of children, but to ultimately keep everyone safe.

* Name changed

TALKING WITH BOYS
Your son, grandson, nephew, foster son, younger brother—all the boys in your life need your time, energy, and advice to help them grow into healthy young men. Boys are swamped with messages from TV, friends, school, the neighborhood, online, music, and movies. Everything they see and hear tells them what it means to “be a man.” Boys need your advice on how to behave toward girls. Boys are also watching how you and other men relate to women to figure out their own stance towards girls. Through your guidance, they’ll learn that real men respect women and that violence never equals strength.

Visit www.endabuse.org for specific tips on talking to boys.
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