

Working With Foster Parents – Important Things to Know

“Being a foster parent is the hardest job I have ever loved. What’s hard about it are all the unknowns when they arrive, juggling everyone into the schedule, and my fears for them when they leave. That is the hardest thing. If a CASA is involved in the case it’s always easier. I am better informed while they are with me, and I know they have someone looking out for them when they go.” Susan, Boulder County Foster Parent

WHAT FOSTER FAMILIES COMMIT TO:

- 24/7 commitment to very disturbed, disrupted, angry kids
- *The great unknown* – a lack of information about children coming into their homes – not knowing what the kids have experienced or how they will respond to the home and family
- Dealing with and scheduling the multitude of professionals who come with each child (e.g., social workers; attorneys; therapists; CASAs; etc.) is overwhelming and can feel intrusive. The number of professionals multiplies with each child in the home. Consider the organizational skills needed to keep this on track!
- People talk about them behind their backs. Foster families are under constant scrutiny. Privacy is often not respected.
- Dealing with delayed reaction to parental visits. The fallout from supervised visits is often a delayed reaction that the CASA may or may not see.
- Falling in love with a child and having to let him/her go.

FOSTER PARENTING IS DIFFERENT FROM RAISING YOUR OWN CHILDREN

- Foster parenting is *hyper-vigilant/hyper-protective parenting*. Foster parents may have a sense of needing to be perfect to balance the child’s past. They maintain a constant awareness of their words and actions.
- Foster parents may have fears related to dealing with the birth family. They also need to be *positive* with children about their parents, within the bounds of reality.
- Foster parents may have a fear of sending the kids they are hyper-parenting off with an unknown person, especially if no relationship has been established first.
- Behavior management: foster parents can only deal with one thing at a time or risk alienating or overwhelming the child. This often gives the impression to an outside observer of ignoring or failing to deal with the child’s issues.

FOST-ADOPT FAMILIES HAVE A DIFFERENT MINDSET

- Fear of losing the child
- Greater tendency to want to erase or negate child’s past
- May be asked to help transition the child back to the birth family

THE CHILDREN'S REALITY

- Dealing with trauma of being removed from the home
- Feeling responsible for family dysfunction – may have been or are being directly blamed by siblings and birth parents for “the system’s” involvement in their lives
- Loyalty to birth family vs. settling into and bonding with foster family creates emotional tug-of-war

THE PERFECT SET-UP FOR SPLITTING BEHAVIORS

- Manipulation and splitting behaviors are a common theme amongst kids in out-of-home placement. All kids can do this, but for foster children it is a mirror of family dysfunction – no conflict resolution skills have ever been modeled. Setting up splits is a learned behavior – it’s how they have learned to get action or attention.
- The child views the CASA as his/her special advocate, apart from the “system” in a non-punitive role. The foster parent is the rule and limit setter – not a popular thing for kids.
- The child therefore has a great opportunity to play the foster parent and the CASA against each other, which serves no one.

WHAT FOSTER FAMILIES MOST WANT A CASA COMING INTO THEIR HOMES TO UNDERSTAND

- CASAs are greatly appreciated and are seen as consistently improving outcomes for children.
- To respect our confidentiality. Do not share information about us with birth parents without permission.
- Get feedback from ALL involved adults. We are often overlooked or undervalued as a source of information.
- For CASAs to share information they legally can with foster families, and explain what they can and cannot talk about.
- Understand that it’s hard not to resent the fact that CASAs have more information about a child and his/her family than we do.
- Remember that you, the CASA, are coming into our homes. Be respectful of our space and time – each child comes with so many people to schedule in.
- Talk to us. Get our perspective before judging a situation. Ask before jumping to conclusions.
- Understand that foster families live in glass houses and are under constant scrutiny. We are often treated like clients and our homes like a facility. It’s hard not to get defensive.
- We make a huge commitment to these children, have their best interest at heart and advocate for them as well.
- Understand the set-up for splitting behaviors between us by the child.

THE PERFECT SET-UP FOR SUCCESS

Both foster families and CASA volunteers should have a protocol for their initial meeting. They should immediately establish a positive, respectful relationship. Here are a few considerations for initial meetings:

CASA and Foster Family should:

- Meeting or talk by phone first without the children present
- Understand each other's roles
- Exchange emergency contact information
- Share information on food allergies, special dietary concerns, and special medical considerations.
- Agree to ask before making judgments
- Discuss house rules and what the foster family is and is not comfortable with
- Try to negotiate best time schedules for both of you
- Share appropriate information with each other (within appropriate limits for the CASA).

**REMEMBER THAT YOU SHARE GOALS,
SERVE THE SAME CHILDREN, AND
NEED TO WORK TOGETHER IN THEIR BEST INTEREST**