

Loyalty Issues in Foster Care

"Until he can establish roots in his present relationships we need to protect his roots to the past, no matter how deformed they may be; without roots the child will die of emotional starvation." --Ner Littner, 1975

Individuals enter the field of foster care for many reasons, usually sharing the common goal of the desire to help children in need. When a child placed in foster care enters your home, it is often an intense experience, both wonderful and trying at times; one you never could have imagined. One common misconception foster parents often have is the expectation the child in their care will instantaneously be grateful to them. At the start of their experience, many foster parents embrace a rescue fantasy surrounding the idea they are taking a child out of a negative and sometimes dangerous situation, while providing a child with a safe and loving environment. However, they quickly find themselves bewildered as their child speaks highly of their birth family and wonder why their child does not appreciate all they have given to them. By accepting a child's loyalty to their birth family and addressing these issues with respectful and effective strategies, we can help children to build relationships and adjust to their current situation in a healthy manner.

In order to better understand your child's experience, let's take a moment to reflect on your own childhood and who you are as an individual today. Think of how you speak, act, laugh, respond to crises, handle conflict, work, relax, and play. So many of those qualities



originated from your relationships, observations, and interactions with your own family and you have internalized those traits and behaviors as who you are. The family is the first place of socialization, which is certainly also true with children placed in foster care. Even if the family situation included abuse or neglect, the start of how you perceive yourself as a person lies there; therefore, when we speak of birth families or our families of origin, in essence, we are talking about a significant part of who we are as individuals. It is important to remember that even children raised in an environment of abuse or neglect likely have positive memories and experiences with their family. We certainly want children to hold onto those happy times and create an atmosphere where they will openly share them with us.

When children come into care they often struggle with loyalty issues: "the child may believe that if he is accepting of the placement and becomes emotionally close to his subsequent caregivers that he is being disloyal to the birthparents. Likewise, he may subsequently believe that positive feelings about the birth family indicate disloyalty to the foster family (Fahlberg, V., 1998)."

So now that we recognize it is normal for loyalty issues to be present with children placed in foster care, we must deal with the challenge of how to address this important issue effectively. Many questions emerge:

- How can we honor our child's birth family?
- How can we let our child know that it is okay to love and care for both their birth family and their foster or adoptive family?
- If we sense that a child's behaviors or emotions are related to loyalty issues, what are appropriate responses?
- When loyalty issues arise, how do we deal with our own intense emotions as parents

The following are suggested techniques and interventions to help address loyalty issues and encourage healthy relationships between all impacted parties: children, foster parents, and birth parents.

- When a child arrives in your home, state to the child that it is not your intention to replace their parents. Give them permission to continue loving their parents and offer your support to both the child and the parents. Let the child know it is your role to be there for the child and keep them safe until they are ready to go home, should that be the permanency goal.
- It is also helpful to let the birth parents know this same information and offer the same support. If birth parents feel your support, they can be instrumental in giving their child permission to form a healthy relationship with you as foster parents, as well as maintain their own relationship with their child.
- Be aware that not all birth parents will be accepting of your support and may even present as hostile towards you. Some birth parents might question your parenting methods or actually instigate loyalty issues with their child. Remember not to vent to the child, as they are struggling with their own emotions and loyalty issues. Recognize that the birth parent is grieving and might be displacing their own anger regarding the situation onto you. Utilize your workers to offer guidance and support in dealing with these difficult situations.
- Accept that both you as foster parents and the child's birth parents are important in a child's life.
- Make sure you do not criticize a child's birth parents, including their way of parenting. It is certainly appropriate to teach a child about healthy parenting, safety, boundaries, rules, etc; however, you can do this through positive learning opportunities instead of at the expense of the birth family. A child will be much more receptive to this information if they do not have to focus on defending their family or themselves.

- With your child, it is alright to discuss the birth parents responsibility involving both placement in foster care and their responsibility to work through the necessary steps to reunify with their child. Teaching about responsibility is not the same as stating fault or blame.
- Recognize your own feelings towards a child's birth parents. There might be times when you find yourself angered, saddened, or horrified by a birth parent's actions; however, it is not the child's role to be your emotional support for these issues. Utilize an appropriate support network to provide emotional support and process your feelings. Case workers or significant others can be helpful in assisting you in dealing with these intense feelings.
- Do not throw out items a child brings with them from their birth family. Many of these items hold special meaning to a child that although we may not understand; we need to respect their value to the child. Allow a child to decide if they want to part with an item. If certain belongings are inappropriate for your household, you can have the child design a special box to store these items in to take with them when they leave the home. In addition, you and the child can use this intervention as an ongoing memory box to add special mementos throughout their time in your care.
- Allow your child to share their own family experiences. Listen openly and without judgment.
- Most importantly, find ways of honoring your child's family traditions. Ask a child how they would celebrate holidays, what activities they did during family time, their family routines, and what they miss about being with their family. Try to incorporate some of their traditions into your own family's activities.

Reference: Fahlberg, V., (1998): Separation and Loss. Presentation for Adoption '98: Networking for Children: Albany, New York.

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