SESSION THREE LOGISTICS

Session Three: Building Relationships

Duration: 2 hours

Session Goals: In this session, participants are invited to think about the range of strategies for building and sustaining relationships with children and teens who have experienced profound harm and loss in previous relationships. Participants are encouraged to share their own experiences and strategies with other group members.

Materials Needed:
- Whiteboard or flip chart and markers
- PowerPoint slides
- Pens and paper
- Multicolored markers on each table

Session Summary:
- Good relationships require many ingredients, including: Communication, Respect, Joy, Curiosity, Acceptance, Mutuality, Repair, Trust
- When building your relationship, remember the lens of the child or teen. He or she may:
  - Carry other relationships with him or her
  - Expect harm, abandonment or rejection
- Relationships take time. You will need to:
  - Prepare
  - Ease in
  - Meet the child where he or she is
  - Ride the roller coaster
  - Reconnect
  - Cultivate joy
Do

- Greet the Foster Parents and review outline of session.
Healthy Relationships
What are the ingredients of a healthy relationship?

**Goal**
To engage the group in identifying elements of positive relationships and illustrate that relationships with children or teens in foster care are similar to many other relationships in their own lives.

**Do**
- Show the first slide, then go to next slide.
**Ask**

- When you think about the positive relationships in your life, what defines them? What words would you use to describe them?
- If no one speaks up, you can mention things like trust, fun, etc. Write the group’s words down on the whiteboard or flip chart.
- If not mentioned, ask the group to think about words like curiosity and repair. **Ask**: “Why might these words be important?”
Ask

- How do children communicate?
How Children Communicate

Facial Expressions
Tone of Voice
Extent of Speech
Posturing/Muscular Expression
Approach Vs. Avoidance
Affect Modulation Capacity
Mood

Teach
❖ Review list of ways that children communicate.

Ask
❖ Ask the parents what were items on the list they knew? What were items on the list they didn’t know?
Teach

- Review definition of attunement with Foster Parent.
Teach
  Tell the Foster Parent that in the next few slides we are going to learn to identify the specific language for their individual child.
Facial Expressions

What expressions does your child show on their face?

Do
  ✔ Have the parent write out their responses.
**Tone of Voice**

Do your child’s voice become louder? Softer? Higher-pitched?

**Do**
- Have the parent write out their responses.
Extent of Speech

Does your child suddenly have more to say than usual?

Do they become quiet?

How pressured (in a rush) is their speech?

Do

- Have the parent write out their responses.
Quality of Speech

Do your child’s words become disorganized?
Do they ramble or have a hard time getting words out?
Do their words seem more babyish or regressed than usual?

Do
- Have the parent write out their responses.
Posturing/Muscular Expression

What does your child’s body look like?
Are they curled up?
Do they clench their fists?
Are their muscles tense or loose?
Is their posture closed or open?

Do
- Have the parent write out their responses.
Do

- Have the parent write out their responses.

Approach vs. Avoidance

Does your child become withdrawn and retreat?

Do they become overly clingy?
Affect Modulation Capacity

Does your child have a harder time than usual being soothed and/or self-soothing?

Do they start to need more comforting from you or someone else?

How receptive are they to comfort? Does this change when they get stressed?

**Do**
- Have the parent write out their responses.
Mood

Does your child’s mood overtly change?

Do
- Have the parent write out their responses.
Mirroring Is:

Engaging in a child’s or teen’s experience and reflecting it back
Communicating through language, relationship and emotion that you see the child
Goal
To provide examples of how you can mirror experience through language.

Teach
- Following are teaching points for each of the three examples of mirroring listed on this slide.
  - **Communicate curiosity and interest:** You will notice in this example that Olivia’s behavior — slamming the door — is not addressed or reflected upon at all in this response. Her foster parent is communicating the fact that he or she noticed Olivia’s discomfort and is communicating interest in understanding more about that discomfort.
  - **Reflect affect:** Olivia is clearly experiencing emotion in this example. Her foster parent reflects what he or she sees and labels the emotion state (upset) that Olivia is showing in her behavior and verbal expression.
  - **Reflect cues:** In this example, the foster parent is noticing the behavior and communicating his or her understanding that the behavior is a clue that big feelings are happening.
Goal
To provide examples of how you can mirror experience through language by providing validation and normalizing experiences.

Teach

- **Validate**: To validate someone’s experience reassures them that their experience makes sense. Here Olivia’s foster parent communicates her understanding of your child’s perspective by stating that it is hard when you feel like people don’t like you. The child is simply stating what they believe is their perceived experience, which may or may not be grounded in reality. That’s worth emphasizing: The foster mom is not communicating about the truth of this experience. Rather, she is reflecting the truth as the child perceives it. Children or teens who have experienced trauma often believe others think their experiences lack validity, importance or truth. It is important to remember the lens that foster children may be using, as we discussed in previous meetings. There may be times when we have to recognize that perception is more important than reality.

- **Normalize**: To normalize is to use a statement that tells the person that he or she is not alone in his or her experience. The point is to reduce the child’s or teen’s experience of shame and isolation. In this example, the foster parent communicates that Olivia feeling upset is a normal reaction, and that being in this situation could be upsetting for anyone, including the foster parent.
Goal
To provide examples of how you can mirror experience through behavior.

Discuss
- Language is only one way to mirror experience. Remember: Most communication is nonverbal, so finding nonverbal ways to mirror can be powerful, too.
- We talked earlier about the ways you read communication in your own relationships, and how many of these are nonverbal. Refer to list of clues that people give us to communicate experience (tone of voice, facial expressions, emotions, energy, body tension, eye contact, connection, etc.). It can be helpful for you to mirror and match these clues by reflecting them back through your own behavior.

Ask
- What are other examples of how you could mirror your child in this example? If participants can’t think of alternatives, you could mention providing the child with some space, or putting your head down on the table, too.
Goal
To provide examples of responses that may interfere with mirroring.

Discuss
- Read and review the list of examples provided in this slide.
- Can anyone provide additional examples of what they might avoid? If there is no response, move on.
- Discuss that these responses are normal. Emphasize the relationship between these responses and the emotional state of the responder, citing the importance of using the caregiver toolbox.
**Goal**
To provide foster parents and caregivers with the opportunity to practice mirroring.

**Explain the Activity**
- We are going to practice mirroring. Please get into groups of two or three. I want each of you to share with others in your group something that happened to you this week. It can be a brief story about how your day or week went.
- Take turns being the storyteller and the person doing the mirroring (the reflector).
- The storyteller will have 1-1 ½ minutes to tell his or her story. During that time, the reflector will look for opportunities to use language or behavior to mirror the storyteller.
- I will call “freeze,” and the reflector will remain frozen — your face, body and words— for about 30 seconds.

**Do**
- Begin part one of the activity. Allow storytellers to tell their story for 1-1 ½ minutes. Then, instruct the reflectors to become nonresponsive; in other words, to try to show no emotion on their faces, and to stop responding with words. Have the reflectors remain frozen for approximately 30 seconds — then end part one of the activity.
- Switch roles and repeat the activity.

**Discuss**
- How did it feel to be in each role? How did it shift or change when we switched from mirroring to freezing?
Recall a time when someone came to you with a problem or because he or she was upset and you responded in a way you felt good about afterward.

What did you do well?
Why do you think it went well?
Building a healthy relationship with a Foster Child
Goal
To remind the group of content shared at an earlier session: remembering the child’s or teen’s lens of the relationship.

Teach
- Previously, we spoke about the altered lens that foster children may have for relationships. When you interact with children and teens who have experienced repeated harm, it is important to remind yourself that at any given moment, the child or teen may be interacting not just with you, but with every person who has ever hurt, rejected or abandoned him or her in the past.
- This means that even if you are kind, gentle, generous and loving, the child or teen may anticipate that you will criticize, reject, abandon, judge or be otherwise harmful.

Ask
- So what do you think children and teens coming into your home expect from you?
- How does that show up in their behavior?
- Why might it be important to remember the child’s or teen’s lens when entering into your relationship with him or her? How might this affect your approach to the child or teen?
**Goal**
To introduce remaining content on strategies and considerations in building relationships with children and teens in foster care.
Goal
To address pre-placement considerations.

Teach
- Note that, for many groups, this content will be a review. As a result, it is important to acknowledge that they may have already taken these steps.
- We often think about addressing relationship issues when they arise, but often the best time to start thinking about building the relationship is before a child or teen is placed in your home.
- It is important to explore all family members’ thoughts, feelings and ideas about having a new member of the family. You may want to seek outside supports (therapists, spiritual counselors, etc.) to speak with each family member.
- Children and teens may need extra supports and preparation, just as they would if you were expecting a birth child.
- The post-placement period can feel overwhelming and isolating. Identify resources and connect with supports beforehand to counter this. Be specific: Let others know what you would like from them after placement.

Ask
- Can anyone give examples of ways they prepared their family for a foster child or teen to enter their home?
- In what ways were those strategies helpful?
Goal
To highlight basic strategies for establishing early relationships.

Ask
- Ask participants for examples of ways they approached early relationship building with children in their homes.

Teach
- Note that in addition to any examples that participants gave in the earlier discussion, you are going to discuss other early ways to build relationships.
- Learning about children’s or teens’ preferences is key to helping them feel comfortable. Establish from the beginning that you want to learn what is important to them.
- Many children and teens will come into your home without essentials — a toothbrush, nightlight, hygiene products, etc. A prepared welcome kit is one way to help children and teens immediately establish a sense of ownership (“These are mine”).
- Children and teens may have fears around safety and privacy. It may help to establish a space that belongs to the child or teen. This can be as elaborate as a bedroom with a closed door or as simple as a corner of a room with a blanket to provide privacy. Show the child or teen the space and note that it is always available as long as the child or teen is being physically safe.
- Many children and teens entering your home will have experienced violence, excessive punishment, unpredictable rules and other negative experiences with adult expectations. Being clear about household rules and expectations can reduce anxiety and fear about what to expect.
- If a child or teen coming to your home is of a different racial, ethnic or religious background or has a different sexual or gender identity than members of your family or household, it may be helpful to have an open conversation about this with the family ahead of time. Consider having a similar conversation with the child or teen to establish that acknowledging and discussing differences is OK.
- Very few people have less control and power than a child or teen in foster care. Look for opportunities early on to give the child or teen choices (where to sit at a table, whether to sleep with door open or closed, whether to bathe in the morning or at night, etc.).
**Goal**
To highlight key features in relationship building.

**Ask**
- Thinking about the early stages of placement, what have your experiences been with relationship building? What have you done that worked well? What do you think has been really important for building success, and what has made relationship building more challenging?

**Teach**
- **Note: Cover only those points participants haven’t already addressed.**
- It is important to enter into the relationship at the child’s or teen’s pace. Attempting to move too quickly can frighten or overwhelm a child or teen; keeping him or her at arm’s length can communicate rejection. Try to get a sense of what will feel comfortable.
- Although it is important to communicate interest in the child or teen, it is also important to be clear that it is his or her choice how much, if anything, to share with you.
- It is important to monitor your own assumptions. For example, don’t assume that a child or teen will or will not struggle with behavior or relationships. You want to be prepared — but you also don’t want your assumptions to influence your interactions with the child or teen.
- Expectations will be important over time, but start slowly. A child or teen may struggle to function when he or she first arrives in your home. Keep your goals simple early on and build.
- Within what’s comfortable for you, provide children or teens with choices about what to call you. Remember you are a stranger to them but also in a position of immediate imposed intimacy. Language and labels will let them manage that boundary in a way that is comfortable for them.
Goal
To highlight ways to begin creating deeper connections with children or teens in participants’ homes.

Ask
- Invite participants to share ways they have continued to deepen relationships and build trust and safety with children in their home.

Teach
- **Note: Cover only those points that have not already been addressed by the participants.**
  - Your relationship with the child or teen is likely to grow and change over time. Stay aware and curious about your own experience in the relationship, as well as his or her experience. Look for opportunities to ask the child or teen how he or she is feeling about how everyone is getting along, the names people use for each other and any questions about placement, etc.
  - Just like adults, children and teens have many qualities. Be purposefully curious and try to learn about the child or teen, at whatever pace feels comfortable to all of you.
  - Make a point of spending connected time together. You can play, listen to music, talk about the day or any other joint activity. Relationships are built on moments of connection.
  - Support continuity by learning about previous relationships, experiences and preferences. See if you can find ways to continue those (if possible) or at the least acknowledge them (if not).
  - Ask a child or teen how you can be supportive. Be concrete. For instance, ask, “Do you like getting help with homework or would you rather do it alone? What did your (mom, foster mom, grandma, etc.) do at bedtime that you did or didn’t like?”
Goal
To highlight the importance of meeting the child or teen where he or she is and adapting our style to best support the child or teen.

Teach
- Your family probably has norms around things such as how you communicate, how you express emotions, how you spend time together, etc. Within those norms, though, it is likely that different family members have different needs or styles.
- Children or teens entering your home may differ from you as a result of their individual experiences and personalities, or religious or cultural practices. Often, adults expect children and teens to adapt to their ways, which may feel very foreign to them.
- It can help to learn more about the child or teen. You don’t need to completely change who you are, but your expectations or interpretations of children’s or teens’ interactions may shift if you learn their style.
- For instance, some families typically speak quietly in the home and rarely yell. Others have much more intense, loud communications, especially when they are happy and excited. A family who is typically quiet may see a child or teen who shouts frequently as angry, breaking the rules or disrespectful, instead of realizing that this is how the child or teen has learned to communicate in previous settings.

Ask
- Can anyone provide examples where a child or teen in your home had a very different style from you or your family? Were there ways that you were able to adapt or compromise so that everyone felt comfortable? What helped and/or made that hard?
**Goal**
To highlight that even relationships that are going well have ups and downs and that this is particularly true for children and teens in foster care.

**Teach**
- It is important to remember that:
  - Even when relationships are going well, they have ups and downs.
  - Relationships naturally change daily, even moment to moment, based on our moods, our stressors and various experiences in our lives.
  - Even the best relationships can feel hard sometimes.
  - All these things may be particularly true for children and teens in foster care.
  - For children and teens who have been hurt in relationships or have experienced multiple losses, there are many things that can lead them to withdraw or disconnect.
  - These disconnections can feel personal and can lead us in turn to disconnect, feel angry, hurt or rejected.

**Ask**
- What kinds of things might make you or the children or teens in your care disconnect or pull back from your relationship?
- What function do you think disconnecting from a relationship has for a child or teen? For you?
Parenting Styles
Teach

- There are four parenting styles:
  - Authoritative
  - Authoritarian
  - Permissive
  - Avoidant/Uninvolved.
Teach

- Let's look at each style . . . (go to next slide)
Teach
- Review key elements of Authoritative Parenting Style with participants.
Teach

- Review Outcomes for Authoritative Parenting
- Let participants know this is the parenting style is the most successful.
Teach

- Review key elements of Authoritarian Parenting Style with participants.
Outcomes For Authoritarian Parenting

Higher risk of developing self-esteem issues
Can become aggressive or hostile
Tend to follow rules, but their obedience comes at a price (self-esteem issues)
Usually carries into adulthood and shows the child how to become a good liar in an effort to avoid punishment

Teach
- Review Outcomes for Authoritarian Parenting
Teach
- Review key elements of Permissive Parenting Style with participants.
Outcomes For Permissive Parenting

- More likely to struggle academically
- Exhibit more behavioral problems due to not respecting authority or rules
- Often have low self-esteem and report a high level of sadness
- Usually carries into adulthood with children having higher health problems, such as obesity, as an adult

Teach
- Review Outcomes for Permissive Parenting
Teach

- Review key elements of Avoidant/Uninvolved Parenting Style with participants.
Outcomes For Avoidant/Uninvolved

- Low self-esteem
- Do poorly in school
- Have high levels of behavioral problems, as well as high levels of unhappiness.

Teach
- Review Outcomes for Avoidant/Uninvolved
Relationship Challenges
Disconnection is often about protection, not rejection

**Goal**
To highlight the function of disconnection for children and teens who have experienced trauma.

**Do**
- Show slide. Allow participants to comment, if desired.

**Teach**
- Even when we understand that children or teens are protecting themselves, the disconnects can feel like rejection. This is why it is so important to pay attention to your own feelings and self-care needs.
**Goal**
To build skill in managing the inevitable moments of disconnection.

**Teach**
- All relationships will have moments of disconnection.
- When you have been working hard to support a child or teen in your care, moments of disconnection can feel like rejection and ingratitude. It can bring up all sorts of feelings.
- To protect yourself against taking things personally, try to anticipate that there will be good days and hard days. Keep your oxygen mask on — remember to use your self-care toolbox.
- When disconnects happen in your relationship with a child or teen, allow yourself time to regroup, but then take steps toward reconnection. Your ability to reach out will be a powerful message to the child or teen that he or she is worthy of care and repair.
- A key foster parenting goal is to teach children and teens that their relationships can weather conflict and distress — and help them learn to do this in a healthy way.
- To move toward repair, put on your detective hat. Try to understand the situation from the child’s perspective. Remember that even if you don’t agree with or understand the child’s or teen’s lens, the behavior makes sense from his or her perspective.
**Goal**  
To build skill in managing the inevitable moments of disconnection, continued.

**Teach**

- Look for ways to reconnect with a child or teen in your care after relational breaks, conflict or distress. Do this by re-engaging in daily activities, reaching out to ask how he or she is doing or simply saying, “I know we had a hard afternoon, but I still care about you.”
- After moments of distress or conflict, children or teens are likely to stay on the Express Road for a period of time. They may not be able to think about how they are acting. This may mean that they are not yet able to be in a relationship with you or begin to repair the relationship. It is important to give the child or teen permission, whether implicit or explicit, to take the time needed to recover.
- It can be hard to apologize to a child or teen, but doing so provides a powerful message that you care about his or her experience. Apologizing will not make you less of a person or diminish your own emotions. Instead, it serves as a model to the child or teen of how to handle relationships well. Your efforts to repair or apologize validate the child’s or teen’s experience. Consider statements such as:
  - “I know we both got angry, and I’m sorry that my anger felt so scary to you.”
  - “It seems like you felt that I wasn’t listening to you when you had something important to say. I’m sorry that you didn’t feel heard.”
- One of the most important — and hardest — things we can do after conflict is to move on. Our own ability to regulate and release our hard feelings can help the child or teen do the same.

**Ask**

- Does anyone have examples of how you have handled disconnects with children or teens in your care?
**Goal**
To highlight the importance of positive experiences.

**Ask**
- Can anyone share some of the favorite activities you have done with a child or teen in your home — things that built up your relationship and your understanding of one another?

**Teach**
- All relationships are strengthened by positive experiences. The more pleasurable experiences and moments of connection you share with children in your home, the easier it will be to ride the roller coaster and manage the moments of challenge and disconnection.
Goal
To apply the concepts of disconnection and reconnection in relationships to foster parents’ lives.

Do
- Ask participants to get into pairs or small groups and discuss the questions on the slide.
**Goal**
To review the key teaching points from today’s session.

**Ask**
- Let’s review what we have discussed today. Does anyone have any questions?