

Self-Study Course

Communicating Clearly: Skills for Foster Parents

Reviewed May 2023

2.0 Training Credits



This self-study course is adapted from the larger curriculum ***From Home to Home***, a curriculum addressing the topic of working with children and the families they come from. The entire self-study curriculum ***From Home to Home*** is available through the Alaska Center for Resource Families and totals 15.0 hours of training through nine separate chapters. References for sources for the materials included in this self-study are given in full in the complete curriculum.

The questionnaire at the back of this course is a way for the Alaska Center for Resource Families to assess that you have read and understood the information provided. To get 2.0 training credits for this self-study, complete the questionnaire and send it to the address below. You may keep this self-study for future reference.



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COMMUNICATION SKILLS: SKILLS FOR FOSTER PARENTS

No skill is more useful than being able to communicate well. Being able to express your feelings and being able to understand others is a skill we constantly use and improve.

When working with children and the families they come from, communication is an essential tool. Being clear in what we say and choosing our words carefully will help us strengthen families, point out strengths, and confront problems. Whether you are communicating with your foster child, or requesting something of your caseworker or building a partnership with a birth parent, communication is your best tool.

Some people are *natural* communicators! Most of us need to work on new ways of communicating. Several widely taught techniques are valuable for foster parents both in their professional and personal lives. These techniques include both verbal and nonverbal communication techniques. This self-study will explore these areas and how they apply to working with birth parents and foster children.

USING NONVERBAL LANGUAGE

Researchers suggest that 70% of our communication is nonverbal. That means most of the things we say to people are said without words. Nonverbal communication includes the way we hold our bodies and our hands, eye contact, body language, tone of voice, how we use silence, and how close we stand to other people. Different cultures have different nonverbal language. Nonverbal messages are the most difficult part of communication to control because we are often not aware of what we are doing. Most times we are better at reading others than at reading ourselves!

The following exercise shows how simple nonverbal language sends a message we may or may not intend.

EXERCISE #1: Nonverbal Clues

A foster parent drops off a child to visit with his mother at OCS. The birth mother is sitting in the hallway waiting for the caseworker. After a quick hello to the birth mother, the foster mom goes to the counter to page the caseworker. When he arrives, she begins to talk to the caseworker about a medical problem with the child. The mother remains seated and is not included in the conversation. The foster mom continues to hold the baby in her arms.

What nonverbal language is the foster mom using?

What is the message to the birth mom?

Were you able to see the nonverbal language that the foster mom was using? This foster mother was saying many things without saying a word. She walked past the birth mother, she did not talk with the birth mother, she did not include the birth mother in the discussion of the medical problem, and she held the baby away from the birth mother. These messages excluded the birth mother from her own child and his concerns. The foster mom unintentionally sent the message “You are not very important, you don't need to be involved in these things.”

Self-awareness is the best way to monitor our nonverbal language. If we are uncomfortable around someone, we may need to learn to relax through breathing or mental exercises. We may need to make a conscious effort to reach out to someone.

EXERCISE #2: Nonverbal Communication.

Take the scene in Exercise #1. What are the nonverbal ways you as a foster parent can be more including and welcoming of the birth parent? Write your suggestions here. When you are finished, compare your suggestions with those below.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EXERCISE #2

- 1. Offer a handshake.**
- 2. Look birth mother in the eye.**
- 3. Be comfortable with silence, don't talk too much.**
- 4. Pay attention to your own stress or discomfort clues.**
- 5. Listen, ask questions, ask how parent is doing. Help the child make contact with the parent through physically giving the child to the parent, expressing cheer upon seeing the parent, have the child give parent a drawing.**
- 6. Where are the children when you talk? Are you shielding them with your body? Help the child connect with the parent.**
- 7. Include parent in a discussion with the caseworker when it involves the child.**

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

We have more control over our verbal communication or words than we have our nonverbal messages. It may seem artificial to speak in certain ways, but the art of communication takes practice. You can criticize someone and they will get defensive. Or you can learn to express your same concerns in a way that will be easier for people to hear. You then have a better chance of coming up with a solution. Communication does not manipulate people. It helps honest exchange of feelings and information to happen. This is most effective when two parties really want something to change.

If we want to foster good communication, we want to avoid communication blocks (or phrases that stop communication). These communication phrases may be used with good intentions, but they often stop the communication by telling the other person that what he or she feels or thinks is not as important as what you feel or think. The following are examples of communication blocks.

WAYS THAT BLOCK COMMUNICATION

Commanding	“Oh, don’t feel that way. You know she didn’t mean it.”
Distracting	“Honey, I’m so sorry. How about an ice cream? Would that make you feel better?”
Interrogating	“Well, how did the visit go? Was everything okay? What did your mom say?”
Moralizing	“That’s what happens when you hang out with a bad crowd. Just like what happened to your mother’s boyfriend who ended up in jail.”
The know-it-all	“I’ve seen that happen all the time. And what you have to do is...”
Sarcasm	“Oh, like you are the first kid in the world who ever felt this way.”

These are words that block communication with the person we are talking to. They tell the other person that he is not important, or that his feelings don’t matter as much as what you think.

We want to use words that help communication. That is, we want to speak in a way that tells children and parents that what they think and feel is as important as what we think and feel. The following listing includes ways to include ways to encourage communication.

WAYS TO ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION

Encouragers Show you are listening.

“Hmmm.....”

“I see....”

“I understand....”

Active Listening Listen for the feelings behind the words.

“You seem concerned that you don’t get to see your kids enough.”

“You are worried that the caseworker is not letting you know what is going on.”

“You are pretty disappointed that your mom didn’t show up.”

Use “I” Statements Describe the behavior and state your own feelings without blaming the other person.

Not: *“You are late again. I’ve been waiting for 30 minutes.”* (or not saying anything at all but wanting to.)

Try: *“When you are late, I feel frustrated and Jimmy gets depressed because he misses you.”*

Not: *“How many times have I told you not to do that. You’re just not paying attention.”*

Try: *“When I have to remind you to do something, I get angry because you know what you have to do.”*

Invite a response or suggestion Try a problem solving approach.

“This is how I have always done it. Do you have a suggestion from your own experience?”

WHEN YOU NEED TO ADDRESS A CONCERN OR WHEN YOU FEEL ATTACKED

Foster care and visitation often sets up an adversarial relationship between foster parents and birth parents. It does not have to be this way. If you try to put parents at ease and work to build an honest partnership, you have a better chance of lessening the jealousy or hostility. Yet, problems are still sure to occur. Birth parents may seem critical of a foster parent’s way of parenting. It may help foster parents to view this criticism as a birth parent’s only chance to parent since she or he does not have day-to-day control over a child’s care. These criticisms may say more about a birth parent’s feelings of loss than of the quality of care the foster parent is providing. Some of these concerns are very valid. Though some seem petty to the foster parents.

When addressing concerns of a birth parent or a caseworker, remember to express your feelings by using “I” statements. Avoid accusatory statements. Describe what is going on, tell how you think or feel, and state the goal of what you would like to happen.

For example:

“Johnny’s visits are supposed to start at 3:00 and it didn’t start until 3:30 today. I get frustrated because Johnny wants to see you and I had to be at another place at 4:30. How can we make sure that you have enough time for a visit and I can plan my day?”

If you get the feeling that you are “under attack”, remember you can choose how to respond. Use the communication techniques outlined in the previous sections as well as the following:

WHEN FEELING UNDER ATTACK OR FEELING CRITICIZED

Reflect the feeling: *“You are concerned that Sarah is not getting enough to eat because she is always so hungry with you.”*

State non-judgmentally what you are doing: *“Meals get put on the table 3 times a day with one snack after school time. There is no snack after dinner, though kids can finish whatever they didn’t finish at dinner time.”*

Invite a suggestion or give a choice:

“Can you suggest some ways that we can handle this?”

“Would you like me to save Sarah’s snack until your visit so that you can make sure she is not too hungry or would you like to bring a snack yourself?”

If needed, broken record: *Repeat your request or statement over and over again in a calm, firm manner.*

Try not to lose your temper! Remain calm and de-escalate the parent’s anger or intrusiveness. Your feelings and needs as a foster parent are important and should be considered. But remember, birth parents do not get a chance to parent their child on a day-to-day basis. The only way they can parent a child is through you! Give consideration to their request whenever you can. Otherwise, negotiate and talk it out when you disagree. It is always difficult not to take things personally when someone is angry. But if you can put some space between you and the person and really try to listen to their concerns, it often defuses the anger and deflects it away from you and on to the real concern. You can choose to get angry and upset back at the parent (or the caseworker) but this often prevents any change in the situation from occurring.

If you have ongoing difficulties with a parent, consult the caseworker to get their help with resolving difficulties.

EXERCISE #3: Responding to Attacks

Using your verbal skills learned in this section write your response to the following situation:

Whenever your foster daughter goes on a visit, her birth mother changes the girl's clothes. Would you address it? Why or why not? If yes, how?

Birth mother sees a cut on the eye of a child and tells the social worker that you must have hurt her or not been watching her. You want to address this with the birth mother. What can you say

TALKING WITH CHILDREN

How much do we tell children about why they are in foster care? How do we help them with their sadness and anger? Of course, the answer to these questions will depend on the age of the child, what you know, and the individual circumstances of the family. The approaches with children are similar to the approaches with adults that are discussed earlier in this self-study. Avoid *communication blocks*. Use *communication encouragers*. In addition, the following suggestions are guidelines for talking with children.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR TALKING WITH FOSTER CHILDREN

- ◆ In order for children to talk, they need time and space. Plan for time to be alone with your foster child. Make yourself “available” so a child can approach you.
- ◆ Many children don't know how to express the feelings they have inside them. It helps to have a foster parent open up a way to talk. “I'm wondering if you have any questions about our home or why you are here. I guess if I was you I'd be pretty mixed up about what is going on.” If a child can't express himself, help him find words. Use books, aids, journals, or talk about similar experiences you might have had, to help a child talk.

- ◆ Don't expect a child to tell you everything. He needs to protect his relationship with you and his family. Some things will probably not be shared.
- ◆ Let children express their feelings. Many times when children start feeling comfortable with a foster family, feelings of anger, rage, and loneliness emerge. Help a child deal with and accept those feelings. Don't tell a child he shouldn't feel that way or convince him it isn't as bad as he thinks. Use active listening so that children know you are really listening.
- ◆ Talk to children honestly and in a way they can understand. Avoid sugar coating information or glossing over concerns. If you don't know when the next visit is, tell the child you don't know. Then see if there is something you can do with the child, such as writing a letter together to the caseworker asking for a visit with a parent. Not knowing is hard for children, but it is better to be honest.
- ◆ Do not talk negatively about a parent. The child may feel mixed feelings, but will be forced to defend his parent. Do not blame or excuse a parent's actions, but explain them in a way the child will understand.
- ◆ Assure the child that the birth parent still cares. With a younger child, you may need to offer reassurance that his mom is still alive and okay. You may have to explain that the parent is not able to take care of the child right now and that the parents are doing things to keep from drinking or to learn to take better care of their children. Use language appropriate to the child's age. Teens need a more straight forward explanation.
- ◆ Tell the child he is staying with you in this safe place until mom can get better to take care of him. You may have to talk about a parent's drug or alcohol problem and his or her struggle to not take those things anymore, so he or she can take better care of the child.
- ◆ Explain that you are not his real mom, but will take good care of him until he can be back with his real mom again. Talk about what you want to be called.
- ◆ Children like to know when they can go home or see their parents again. If possible, it is good that they see their parents fairly early in the placement unless there is a criminal proceeding happening.
- ◆ Some children need a chance to talk with others besides the foster parent. Counselors, teachers and therapists are also valuable resources for giving a child an opportunity to talk.

TO REVIEW:

- **Communication is a vital skill in a family centered approach and in building partnership with parents.**
- **Nonverbal language includes how we hold our bodies, our tone of voice, eye contact and how close we stand to others. It is a powerful form of communication.**
- **Verbal communication includes “communication blocks” and “communication encouragers”. These can be used with both adults and children.**
- **If a foster parent feels he or she is being attacked or criticized, he or she should use their best communication skills to stay calm, to listen carefully, and to express their concerns in a non-threatening way.**
- **A foster parent can help a child discuss his emotions by using the guidelines of effective communication.**



REVIEW QUESTIONS

Upon completing this unit, you should be able to answer these questions:

1. *Can you describe what nonverbal language is and give an example?*
2. *Can you name some of the communication blocks? Can you name several ways to encourage communication?*
3. *Do you know what is meant by the active listening, “I” statements and the broken record technique?*
4. *Can you identify ways to use active communication with birth parents? Can you identify ways to use active communication with foster children?*

TEST