

SELF-STUDY COURSE

Helping Children Stay Connected to Their Families

Revised 7/06

1.5 Hours Credit



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. References for sources of the materials included in this self-study are given in full in the complete curriculum.

If you wish to receive training credit for reading this self-study, please fill out the “CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING” Questionnaire” at the back of this course. Return the questionnaire to the Alaska Center for Resource Families for 1.5 hours of training credit. The course is yours to keep for further reference.

This self study course was developed by Aileen McInnis for the Alaska Center for Resource Families.



RETURN YOUR QUESTIONNAIRE TO:

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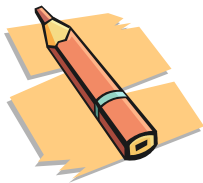
HELPING CHILDREN STAY CONNECTED TO THEIR FAMILIES: CONTINUITY AND FOSTER CHILDREN

What is “continuity”? How does it affect foster children?

Think of a ball and string. If a ball passes from one person to another and one still hangs onto the string, then there will be a connection between two people. If that string is cut or allowed to fray, the string will break or weaken.

Children are the same. Staying connected to their family is important. Connections are especially important for children who have lived in several foster homes. Even when a child will not be able to return home, she needs to understand the culture and family she came from. She needs to know her history, her memories, and the important people in her life. This becomes very important for teens that are making the transition between childhood and adulthood.

EXERCISE #1: Ways We Provide Continuity



All families try to provide some kind of continuity or family identity for their children. List two ways your family or an important adult tried to provide continuity, family connection or cultural ties for you as a child.

#1:

#2:

THE ROLE OF CONTINUITY IN THE LIVES OF FOSTER CHILDREN

Continuity Helps Us Learn Who We Are

In **Exercise #1**, you may have listed one of many common ways families provide continuity. Scrapbooks, celebrating birthdays, religious community and values, potlatches, stories from elders, handed down objects, stories about each other, reunions, family pictures at Christmas, traditions, knowing who you resemble in the family. All of these tell us who we are. Our families, parents and relatives remember for us when we were little.

Foster children often face the challenge of having several homes during their time in placement. It is easy to lose track, drift and become disconnected from their history. Pieces of their story get lost. Gaps in a child's history appear.

Continuity For Foster Children

Continuity for foster children takes two forms:

1. *Keeping children connected to family, culture, and religious values.*
2. *Preventing gaps in a child's history.*

The first form encourages ongoing contact with birth families whenever possible and helping parents and children stay involved with each other. If parents lose track of day-to-day events, they find it difficult to stay involved with their children. This continuity is a challenge in foster care where visits may happen only once or twice a week.

This kind of continuity means sharing stories of how children are doing in school or groups they are involved in. It may mean saving school papers and drawings to share with the parent. It means providing pictures when possible to keep the parent in touch with his or her child.

The second form of continuity takes place when a child is in out-of-home care for an extended period of time. A child does not "stop" growing when he is in foster care. Someone needs to keep track of his memories for him. This means marking development steps, lost teeth, report cards and celebrations. And because foster care is temporary, this means keeping pictures and establishing a treasure-trove he can take with him. This bundle of memories becomes important as a child moves or is placed for adoption.

This self-study will explore these two forms of continuity:

1. *Keeping contact between parent and child; and*
2. *Constructing lifebooks for children who are in foster care.*

Working With Your Caseworker

As with any involvement with birth families, you need to discuss your level of interaction with the family with your caseworker. Be sure you know what the contact and visitation agreement is. You should have this in writing. If you think something would be helpful to a family or child, by all means, talk to your caseworker about it. It is essential, however, that you support the caseplan for the family.

WAYS TO PROMOTE CONTINUITY WITH THE BIRTH FAMILY

Patricia Ryan of the University of Michigan offers suggestions for encouraging parental involvement. Some of them may work for you. If you are unsure if something is allowed, talk to your caseworker.

Include birth parents in:

- * School conferences or Parents Night.
- * Clothes shopping
- * Planning for a child's behavior changes
- * Decision of what toys or equipment the child needs

Help child with:

- * Making a birthday cake or giving a birthday party for birth parents
- * Making of buying gifts for birth parents
- * Taking photos of the child with birth family to give to the parents
- * Showing parents grades, awards, etc.
- * Remembering Mother's Day and Father's Day
- * Maintaining contact with siblings in other foster homes
- * Making allowed phone calls or allowing phone calls to child

Other ways:

- * Ask birth parents about schedules or food preferences of the child
- * Attend parent education classes with birth families
- * Invite the birth parent to dinner
- * With birth parent, make a family tree or scrapbook of photos for the child
- * Take the child to cultural events
- * Have different books, arts, movies and magazines featuring the culture or race of the child

LIFEBOOKS: PREVENTING GAPS IN FOSTER CARE

Lifebooks are a good tool to promote continuity. Foster parents can use one of two kinds of lifebooks. Lifebooks can be as simple as a notebook that the child helps you pick out or a sticky page photo album to hold papers and photos. It may be a box or small cardboard chest that holds papers and mementos. What is most important is that it serves as a collection of a child's memories and history. The lifebook helps a child understand his history and carry it with him throughout his life.

LIFEBOOK #1: *A Record Of His Time With You*

The time a child spends in your home is important. "Firsts" may happen to him while in your home (first steps, awards, first fish). He may form strong friendships with family members. He may have school or Scout events that are special. Remember that someone must do the "remembering" for children. You serve that role for a foster child you also provide a connection to the parent who has been separated from parts of a child's life. You remember for the whole family.

Beside ongoing communication about such events, a nice gesture is a scrapbook of your foster child's stay with you. If a child moves back home or to another foster home, he will have something to remember his time with you. This scrapbook also provides a record for parents to know what his life was like with you. This is especially important for babies and very young children who have no memory of events.

INFORMATION THAT COULD BE INCLUDED IN A LIFEBOOK

- ◆ Pictures of him, family members, pets, teachers, friends
- ◆ Pictures of holidays and birthdays
- ◆ Pictures with his birth parents, extended family
- ◆ Pictures or stories about house, church, school
- ◆ Important school papers, report cards
- ◆ His better drawings
- ◆ Programs from school, church or scouting events
- ◆ Names of teachers, schools, favorite friends
- ◆ A handwritten letter to the child
- ◆ Stories about the child: how he showed affection, favorite foods, cute things he did, favorite games or toys
- ◆ Developmental milestones
- ◆ Information about injuries, illnesses or hospitalization
- ◆ Pictures of him as a baby or small child



LIFEBOOK #2: *The Story Of My Life*

A more involved kind of lifebook is used to prepare children for adoption. It may also be used in counseling to help children understand what has happened to them. A lifebook helps a child write the story of his life using drawings, pictures, and words. If the child is old enough to write it down, he does it. With younger children the therapist or worker can write down the story. It starts at the beginning with the child's birth and continues to the present day. It tells the story from the child's point of view. This kind of lifebook also uses pictures, mementos and some of the other materials listed above.

This kind of lifebook helps children understand why they went into foster care, why they can't live with their parents, and why they are being adopted. It explains abuse, alcoholism and violence in a child's life in a way he can understand. Children are often reluctant to confront feelings of sadness and abandonment. Yet in order to understand the loss of their family, children need a way to understand and express their feelings. If lifebooks are used in this way, the person doing the book (usually a counselor or adoption worker) must be prepared for feelings of hurt, anger, depression, and resistance. A good relationship is needed between adult and child.

A foster parent may be contacted to contribute letters, pictures or memories for such a lifebook. If you feel a child can benefit by such a lifebook, you may want to suggest it to his caseworker or therapist.

Whether a foster parent puts together a scrapbook or contributes to a child's lifebook, the goal is the same: to provide continuity for a child. The time he spends with you is important. Make sure his important memories and milestones are not forgotten.

TO REVIEW:

- **Continuity means keeping a child connected to his family, culture and community. It also means preventing gaps in his history that are caused by living in several different homes.**
- **Foster parents can help a child stay connected to his family by involving birth parents whenever possible and helping the child stay in contact with their family.**
- **Lifebooks are good tools to help a child fill in gaps in his history. These can be scrapbooks of the time he spent with you or complete life histories.**



REVIEW QUESTIONS

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

1. *Do you know what continuity is? Do you know why it is important for foster children?*
2. *Can you name several ways to involve birth parents with their children?*
3. *Can you describe how to use a lifebook? Can you list several things that can go into a lifebook?*

TEST

