

SELF-STUDY COURSE

Religious and Spiritual Issues in Foster Care

December 2014

2.0 Hours Credit

This course was developed by Olivia Shears, Brenda Ursel, and Aileen McInnis of the Alaska Center for Resource Families and reviewed by Susan Frisby and Yurii Miller, Community Care Licensing Managers with the State of Alaska Office of Children's Services.

If you wish to receive training credit for reading this packet, please fill out the "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING Questionnaire" at the back of this packet. Return the questionnaire to the Alaska Center for Resource Families for 2.0 hours of training credit. The packet is yours to keep for further reference.

For more information about this topic or other topics related to foster or adoptive care, please contact:



Alaska Center for Resource Families
815 Second Ave Suite 202
Fairbanks, AK 99701

1-800-478-7307
479-7307 (Fairbanks/North Pole)
www.acrf.org

The Alaska Center for Resource Families, a project of Northwest Resource Associates, is under contract with the State of Alaska Office of Children's Services to provide training and information to resource families statewide.

Religious and Spiritual Issues In Foster Care

The Role of the Resource Family



INTRODUCTION:

Religion and spiritual issues are a very important part of some families' everyday life, and are not an important part in other families' lives. Issues of religion and spirituality can be complicated and challenging for resource families. This self study explores several issues surrounding religion and spiritual issues that present themselves when a child is living in a licensed foster home.

The goals for this self study include:

1. To clarify what the State of Alaska provides as guidelines to resource families around religious issues by consulting foster care regulations, OCS Policies and Procedures, and the Alaska Resource Family Handbook.
2. To clarify the roles and responsibilities of the resource family home when it comes to the preferred religion or non-religious beliefs of a youth's birth family.
3. To provide guidance to the resource family as to the expression of their own religious beliefs and practices in the area of religion and spiritual practices while providing care to children in state's custody.



Religious and Spiritual Issues in Foster Care

Part One: What is Expected of Resource Families

Introduction:

Families in our society are able to raise their children in the religious and spiritual traditions that they choose, even if that includes raising children in no religious tradition. That is a cherished right in the United States. When licensed foster families care for a child from another family, it is important to understand the responsibilities of the foster family when it comes to the religious preferences of the birth family. This section reviews what guidance is given by the State of Alaska through its policies, laws and regulations.

Foster Care Guidelines from the Handbook and Policies and Procedures

Guidance around religious and spiritual issues for the foster parent licensed in Alaska is limited. Requirements from foster care regulations are outlined in several places, including OCS Policies and Procedures, Alaska Statutes and Regulations regarding religion and foster care, and the Alaska Resource Family Handbook.

The Alaska Resource Family Handbook (State of Alaska Office of Children's Services, p. 71) states

“It is important to recognize the religious beliefs of a child's family and respect the religious preference expressed by the child's parents. You also need to respect the religious preference of a child nine years of age or older. In both cases, this means locating a resource and enabling (including providing transportation) for the child to attend services of the child's religion.

“You may take a child to your own place of worship if the child is under 9 years of age and the parents do not object. You cannot require that the child attend church; nor can you prevent church attendance as a consequence or a punishment for a child's behavior.”

The Plan for Care (Form **06-9045 Plan for Care for Licensing**) is included in the foster care application packet and includes questions that ask how the resource family would support *religious*, ethnic, cultural heritage and language of the child's family. Religious practices are put in the same category as ethnic and cultural beliefs and licensed resource families are expected to respect and affirm a child's and the child's family's preferences. This includes the willingness of resource families to assist children to attend the child's religious or cultural events even when those practices may differ from the foster family.

When a child is first placed into foster care, in many parts of the state, there may be a Team Decision Making Meeting or TDM. This meeting uses a team approach to try to make the best placement decision for a child. Amongst the things discussed in a Team Decision Meeting

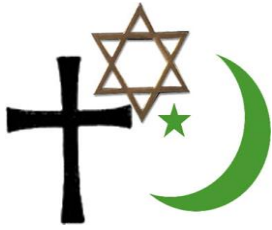
“Religious and Spiritual Issues in Foster Care” This self-study was developed by the Alaska Center for Resource Families through a grant from the State of Alaska DHSS Office of Children's Services **P. 3**

(TDM) includes a discussion of questions about whether the parent expressed a religious preference concerning placement of the child. Where practicable and in the best interests of the child, the preference regarding religion of a parent will be honored.

Putting these Guidelines into Practice

NOTE: In putting this guide together, the staff at the Alaska Center for Resource Families worked with licensing staff at the Office of Children’s services to provide answers to common questions that come up in foster care regarding religion. In answering these questions, we consulted the foster care licensing regulations and OCS Policies and Procedures as listed above. We also used the following core standards to guide our answers:

- 1. Resource families have a right to express and practice their religious beliefs (or non-beliefs) for their own family members.*
- 2. Birth parents have a right to choose the religious beliefs and practices (or non-religious beliefs and practices) for their child even if the child is in placement.*
- 3. In all situations regarding differences between religious beliefs and values, resource families are asked to respond in a way that is respectful and affirming and does not cause harm to a child in their care.*



Religious and Spiritual Issues in Foster Care

Part Two: Frequently Asked Questions about Religion and the Foster Home

This section will look at common questions that come up in foster care regarding religion. To answer these questions, in addition to consulting foster care licensing regulations and OCS Policies and Procedures, we also used the following guiding principles:

- 1. Resource families have a right to express and practice their religious beliefs (or non-beliefs) for their own family members.*
- 2. Birth parents have a right to choose the religious beliefs and practices (or non-religious beliefs and practices) for their child even if the child is in placement.*
- 3. In all situations regarding differences between religious beliefs and values, resource families are asked to respond in a way that is respectful and affirming and does not cause harm to a child in their care.*

Please note that this self study is a guide for resource families to consider their actions and behaviors in regard to religious and spiritual practices. We have strived to give the most accurate and correct information that we could. In all differences between the information in this series and the regulations, policy and procedures, and Alaska statute, Alaska law and regulations are the final authority.

The questions are broken up into categories:

Placement of a Child in Your Home

Worship Services

Practices at Home

Conflicts between Families

Issues with Youth



PLACEMENT OF A CHILD IN YOUR HOME

Can a birth parent require their child be placed in a home with a similar religious preference?

The birth parent does not have the authority to dictate the religion of the family with whom the child is placed. The Office of Children's Services has the authority for placement decisions but asks the resource family to respect and help the child maintain the religious practices of his birth family. Where practicable and in the best interests of the child, the preference regarding religion of a parent will be considered and honored, but a birth parent cannot require it.

As a resource parent, can I ask what the birth parent's religion is or what a child's religion is before I accept placement of a child?

Yes. You may ask if the child is active in church and other religious activities and ask about the expectation for the child to be able to continue with those activities. You may also ask if it will be an issue to include the youth in your family's specific religious practices. You may indicate to your licensing worker your religion and practices and what your expectations would be for child placed in your home. For example, if you go to church three times a week and would expect the youth to join your family in these activities, ask up front if this is going to be an issue for the youth or the birth family. The more these issues are talked about from the beginning, the better OCS will be able to make a placement decision that is best for your family, the child, and his birth family.



WORSHIP SERVICES

Can I take my foster child to my place of worship?

You may take a child to your own place of worship if the child is under 9 years of age and the parents do not object. Over the age of 9, the child's preferences must be considered. You cannot require that the child attend church; nor can you prevent church attendance as a consequence or punishment for a child's behavior.

What if the birth parents practice a different religion than I do? Do I need to take the child to worship services if those services are not part of my family's tradition?

It is important to recognize the religious beliefs of a child's family and respect the religious preference expressed by the child's parents and the child. Licensing standards

ask resource families to especially honor the religious preference of a foster children nine years of age or older. In these cases, this may mean locating a resource and enabling (including providing transportation) the child to attend services of the child's religion.

Can I invite my child's birth parents to come to my church?

You should ask the child's caseworker and the team prior to doing so. Occasionally safety and boundary issues emerge and once the family is invited, it is very difficult to limit or set boundaries on family contact. In situations like this, it is always important to go slow, to invite - not demand, and to keep the child's caseworker informed.

My child wants to go to his birth parents' church, but I don't want to take him. The service meets at the same time as our church and it's just too difficult to coordinate.

Resource families are asked to do everything within their power to keep the child connected to their birth family and culture. If the roles were reversed, and it was your child in care, how important would it be for your child to continue to share and grow in the spiritual traditions of your family?

That being said, it is still a challenge for our busy resource families. Do your best to be creative in your problem solving. Many churches or worship sites have multiple services held at different times and different days. Some provide transportation. Work with the child's team to help you find a solution that will meet both your needs and the needs of the child in foster care. Is there a relative who can help with transportation? Can the youth attend an earlier service? Can you attend both churches, just at different times?



PRACTICES AT HOME

What if the birth parents have religious views around food/hair/dress that my family doesn't practice? Do I have to do that, too, in my home?

It is important for resource families to recognize the religious beliefs of a child's family and respect the religious preference expressed by the child's parents. Resource families can ask about the child's and family's religious practice prior to accepting placement. It is expected resource families will support a child's religious practices in their homes in a way that does not shame, humiliate or harm a child.

However, foster parents themselves do not need to participate in religious practices that they do not believe in.

My family prays every day at mealtime and at bedtime. Can I include my foster child in that practice? Can I ask that the foster child in my home participate in whatever religious practices are part of our family's usual routine or traditions?

Resource families may continue with their regular religious practices such as praying. Resource families may invite their foster youth to participate in the family practices while also supporting the child to participate in birth family's religion and practices. It is okay to invite; it is not okay to force. You can invite the child to participate voluntarily, however you cannot force his/her participation or discipline him for not participating.

Example: If a family celebrates communion together, they can explain the belief behind the practice and invite the youth to join them. If the youth does not participate, the family can give the youth an alternative activity.

We don't celebrate birthdays or Christmas as part of our religion but the birth parents of our foster child do. They want to give the child presents. How do we handle that?

One suggestion is to make arrangements for a visit or some kind of family contact for a child on that date so that the birth parents have a time to give a gift and celebrate the birthday. Allow the child to have his presents or gifts from his birth parents and open them up in his room. Be prepared to have a discussion about why you don't celebrate these events and use nonjudgmental language so that you are showing respect for the birth family. Help the child or youth find a way to observe his family's traditions or religious events outside of your family.

The birth parents of our foster child don't celebrate birthdays or Christmas as part of their religion, but we do. How do we handle that?

Acknowledge that the birth parents do not celebrate these events and educate yourself as to the reasoning behind it for your own understanding. Be prepared to talk to the child about why you celebrate or believe what you do. Acknowledge that people believe different things. Explain why and how your family celebrates birthdays or religious holidays. Offer an alternative way of celebration with a child that respects the parents' wishes. For example, you may not make a birthday cake on a birthday, but choose a day to do something special to celebrate the child coming to live with you. Or the child comes to church with you, but has a choice of sitting in the back doing homework or watching a video. If the child wants to be part of the celebration, invite to have something of the child's celebration or tradition added to your family's observance. If the child feels uncomfortable or the parent does not want the child to participate on any level, help find an arrangement where the child has another activity or visit.



Conflict

CONFLICTS BETWEEN FAMILIES

I think my child would benefit from being exposed to my religion because his families don't have any belief system at all. Can I do that?

You can include a child in regular activities that your family participates in (youth groups, church services) but you cannot force a child to participate in religious services. You may take a child (of any age) to your own place of worship if the child is under 9 years of age and the parents do not object. You cannot require that the child attend church services nor can you prevent church attendance as a consequence or punishment for a child's behavior. Some birth parents appreciate a foster family sharing religious education with a child; some birth parents do not. Birth parents have a right to choose the religious beliefs and practices (or the non-religious beliefs and practices) of their child even if the child is in placement. The best guideline here is, "Invite, Don't Force."

My child's birth parents have beliefs that are at odds with my own.

Resource parents should discuss differences as early as possible in the placement, if not before placement occurs. With support from the social worker and other team members, a resource parent can usually work out a plan to address how the differences will be handled on an individual basis. Asking for help to resolve the issue and talking together will be the best for the child.

However, your family has a right to your beliefs and practices. If these are an important part of your family life, you need to let your licensing worker and your social worker know this up front. Children and their birth parents also have a right to their beliefs and that doesn't end when a child comes into care. If you are not able to support a child's beliefs or his family's because it is in direct conflict of your own, OCS needs to know this up front so they can avoid placing you or the child and his family in that position. When OCS contacts you for placement, you should also ask at that point about a child's/child's family's religious belief and that will help you make the decision of whether or not that child would be a good match for your home. We want to find the right balance between respect for the beliefs of the foster home and respect for the beliefs of the birth family.

We don't believe in a god, but we have a child coming into our home from a very religious family. What is expected of us?

Talk to the caseworkers frankly about your concerns and come up with an agreement of what you are willing to do and not willing to do. Respect the family and their right to choose the religious beliefs and practices of his or her child even when the child is in placement. Find out about any food restrictions or faith services that might be required. If a family wants a child wants to attend a church service and you don't want to go, work with the family or the caseworker to help find someone to take the child to the services. Be prepared to answer questions about your own beliefs in non-judging way. Establish rules of respect for all folks in the family when talking about belief (or in your case, non-belief.) Children need to learn to respect others' beliefs and they do this by watching you treat them with respect and by learning to treat other people's beliefs with respect.

My foster child's birth mom talks badly about the church we go to and our religion in front of the child. She insists to the social worker that we better not be talking about religion with her child.

In this situation, pull together the child's team for support and to develop a plan based on the particulars of the situation. Resource families are asked to respect the religious preference expressed by the child's parents. However, resource families also have a right to practice their own religious and spiritual beliefs in their home.

Resource families should always address these issues of differences with the child or youth with respect and affirmation. Your child may not want to talk about religious issues at all but be prepared to answer questions about your own beliefs and avoid judging the mother. Establish rules of respect for all folks in the family when talking about belief or in your case, non-belief. Children need to learn to respect others beliefs and they do this by watching you treat them with respect and by learning to treat other people's beliefs with respect.

If a child is over nine years of age, he can express a preference of where he may attend religious services and that may not be in agreement with what the birth parent or the resource parent wants. In situations where there may be problems or conflict, it is best to request a meeting with the child's caseworker and family to openly discuss the concerns and make a plan to resolve the issue.



ISSUES WITH YOUTH

A youth in my home is engaging in behaviors that are against our religious values. What should I do?

There are two facets to this question: 1) the values and belief system of the youth, and 2) his expression of the values/beliefs. Your role with the youth will vary in regards to those two aspects.

First, can you as a foster parent respect and honor the beliefs and values of the youth even if you do not agree with them? Youth and foster families do not have to share the same values around issues such as sexuality, diets, or holidays in order to get along. However, belittling, shaming, punishing, or ridiculing the youth for holding beliefs contrary to your own is not permitted. Youth have a right to be safe (physically and emotionally) in a foster home.

Adolescence is normally a time of questioning and developing morality, identity and sexuality. Foster parents can engage this developmental stage by allowing the youth to discuss his thoughts and feelings without feeling judged or condemned. If resource families can engage in this exploration with the youth, youth may feel less of a need to rebel against the strongly held beliefs of the family. He can be encouraged to take the time to explore who his is and what he believes.

Secondly, while foster families need to be respectful of the values and beliefs of the youth in their home, they can set very clear boundaries around how the actions are expressed in their home.

For example: A Jewish family who observes the dietary restrictions of their faith can ask the youth not to prepare or eat certain foods in their home out of respect for their religion. The youth can be given the freedom to eat as he pleases when not in the family's home.

Or a youth brings home the Koran and begins to explore Islamic practices in a devoutly Catholic family and insists that all images representing God be removed from your home. As a foster parent, you can set limits on that behavior by allowing the youth to have control what is up on the walls in his room. You may also find other opportunities for the youth to explore and support the Islam faith through other venues.

How do I handle the religious or spiritual questions of older youth in my home? Some youth seem uncomfortable about talking about religion at all and other youth seem to be really hungry for something to believe in that's bigger than themselves. How do I even begin the conversation about what a youth is comfortable or uncomfortable with?

It is developmentally appropriate that an adolescent has questions about spirituality, beliefs, religion, and morality. It is appropriate that they explore, ask questions and experiment with different beliefs systems too. The best course is to follow the youth's lead and respect the birth family. Resource families should not attempt to change a child's religious tradition or faith. Provide lots of opportunities for all the children and youth in your home to ask questions, be exposed to different ideas, including spirituality and religion, and have access to books, resources and media that expose youth to religion. Being non-judgmental and open and using triggers such as news or television programs might open up avenues for discussion.

If you practice a religion, you can talk about your own beliefs and why you believe what you do, but be careful not to push your religion on them or come across as if you are preaching. If a youth is interested, provide some different resources and venues for youth to explore different faiths or invite him to explore a youth group at your church. Ask if they know any of their friends who go to a church that they might be interested in checking it out.

My foster teen told me that he thinks he is gay and I belong to a faith that says that is wrong.

This is a difficult situation for many foster families who may feel pressure between their responsibilities to provide a safe place for any child placed in their home and their own personal religious beliefs. Acceptance of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, or Transgendered) persons might come into conflict with some religious teachings. Some people fear that they will have to choose between their faith and supporting their youth—but this is not always the case. Many religious communities welcome LGBT youth, adults, and their families. It may be important to know that there are other options if your family does not feel welcomed or comfortable at your place of worship.

The Office of Children's Services strives for Safety, Well-Being and Permanency for each child in their care. Your role as a foster parent is to help a youth feel safe in your home. If you are willing, learn everything you can about how to provide physical and emotional safety for an LGBT youth. If you are unwilling to parent a teen who is gay or lesbian or transgendered because of your religious beliefs, OCS needs to know that upfront so they can avoid placing you or the child in that position.

However, sometimes youth are placed before sexual identity has been realized or expressed. If you are willing, learn everything you can about how to provide physical and emotional safety for an LGBT youth. You do not have to change your religious beliefs, but you are asked to treat a youth with respect. At no time should a youth feel

ashamed, embarrassed, humiliated or otherwise treated in a damaging or verbally abusive way in a foster home because of their sexual orientation or expression. If you cannot provide a safe, affirming home for a LGBT youth due to your religious beliefs, work with OCS to transition a youth to a place that can.

Since my foster youth has come to my home, he has been exploring different belief systems with his peers and has become interested in scary religions which I don't know much about. Does OCS expect me to stop this kind of exploration (because as a parent I would be very concerned if my own child was exploring this)? Am I allowed to express concerns?

It is developmentally appropriate that an adolescent has questions about spirituality, beliefs, religion, and morality. It is also not unusual for a teen to choose something that might be very different or even shocking to his or her parents or guardians. Religion is a deeply personal topic and many of us have very strong biases or opinions about other religious beliefs. Sometimes the belief of others may directly contradict or oppose what we believe and that makes it difficult to have that kind of thinking or actions in our homes. That is a difficult place for foster parents to be in.

It is important to understand what your youth is doing and who he is exploring these ideas with before you can understand what you need to do next. This is best achieved through open communication. If you don't know something, ask questions and express concerns. Whether it be an established religion or an uncommon one or even one that you think is harmful, he is going to be more likely to listen to you if you come from a place of respect. If you jump to harsh, judging language, or condemnation, ordering or commanding, you will probably lose a chance to explore more or express concerns. If a child is involved with something that is hurting him, potentially hurting him, causing him to interfere with normal functioning and daily life, then a foster parent needs to act and work with the social worker. If a foster parent finds a youth's beliefs and values in direct violation with his own beliefs, this is a time to discuss the situation with the caseworker or counselor and find out what your options are. At no time should we be physically, emotionally or verbally abusive to a foster youth in our care. At no time should a foster parent engage in any practices that are harmful to children.



Religious and Spiritual Issues in Foster Care

Part Three: Conclusion

This Self Study explored the complicated and nuanced issues surround religion and spiritual issues that come up in resource families. While there is some guidance in the foster care regulations, The Alaska Resource Family Handbook, and in OCS policy and procedures, often resource families are left to use their good judgment and consider the particulars of the situation. Resource families must balance their own belief system or religion with a responsibility to honor the religion of the child’s family.

We encourage you to use these following guidelines along with the guidelines in this training when considering issues regarding religious and spiritual issues in foster care.

- 1. You and your family have a right to express your religious beliefs (or non-beliefs) and practices.*
- 2. Birth parents have a right to choose the religious beliefs and practices (or the non-religious beliefs and practices) of their child even if the child is in placement.*
- 3. In all situations regarding differences between religious beliefs and values, resource families are asked to respond in a way that is respectful and affirming and not harmful to the child in your care.*

TEST