

5-2013

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SOURCE Citation

Fraser, Theresa, "Tips for the Tough Cases" (2013). *Faculty Publications and Scholarship*. Paper 20.
http://source.sheridancollege.ca/fahcs_comm_publ/20



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Tips for the Tough Cases

By Theresea Fraser
Foster Focus Contributor

This is an analogy that I utilize with new families that I work with to stress to them that our view and functionality of family is different in EVERY family (biological, foster, adopted, blended, step or created). If we stop to think of our own families of origin and our partner's family of origins -the variances often make holidays spent together interesting, enjoyable or even stressful at times.

Foster children coming into our homes may anticipate that your family is like some if not all the others they have immigrated to or visited. Children who have visited many countries may have a passport so full that they don't even remember where they landed. This then becomes the challenge for foster parents.

How can we greet, orientate and make comfortable children who are highly invested in just being tourists instead of citizens? Many foster families with the support of the placing worker, will know to tour the child around the home.

In the 2002 movie, *White Oleander* there is a scene where the newest foster mother walks the teen around the home and explains that the living room is for entertaining, the boys sleep on the couch because there is no room for beds for them and her own daughter will make room for this child in her room all the while asking the teen if she shares the same religious views as she.

Many messages were conveyed in this initial tour that included:

There is little personal privacy in this home
We are just making room for you
We don't let others see what goes on beyond the living room
I am going to talk about my faith beliefs with you, as it would be good if you shared them.

When children are placed in our home, what messages do we convey? This tour is our first opportunity to convey messages about safety such as where people sleep, where they put their belongings and who the other citizens of the country are.

Lack of safety is what often brings children to our home and it is therefore, the most important emotional and physical state that we want to create in our families.

Important to ensure that children know what the rules are and what measures we have taken to keep them physically safe, emotionally safe and sexually safe. Repeating messages such as "in this home we don't play in each other's bedrooms" or "we respect each other by wearing robes or pajamas from the shower instead of just sporting a towel" or we keep hands and feet to ourselves at all times, are important. These messages may seem elementary to you but not to a child who has a known or unreported history of being sexually abused.

Sometimes we assume that all foster parents provide the same direction, supervision and support to their children as we do.

Thus, it would make sense that we then assume that new immigrants understand the rules of our country. Implied or unspoken rules will not be honored so it is important to share them and model them. It also never hurts to repeat them so that our foster kids know that all citizens abide by the same rules.

It is also important to prepare kids for what is coming, as their previous experience is the template they are working from. Sometime holidays may mean that extended family visits can lead to the child being sexually abused. This may be an unvoiced worry that is demonstrated behaviorally prior to holidays.

That is why it is easy for us to respond with consequences for the child's behavior instead of with reassurance and reflection. Messages such as, "it is understandable that you feel anxious because you have never been here for Christmas or gone to a Drive-In, but it will all be OK.

We are all going to have fun".

It is this writer's belief that children need to experience a few Christmases, a few summer holidays or a few cyclical experiences to reassure them that things are consistent and predictable in this home. This is because their first experience is written-off as an anomaly and the second challenges the cognitive distortions or previous patterns (Perry, 2006) they hold about the experience. Once they start to believe that this event is predictable they then can allow themselves to feel comfortable if not enjoy the experiences hereon as they start to feel safe in the environment.

Foster and adoptive parents can also provide messages about the future such as "next year when we go camping we can bring more games to play so we have more to do if it rains". These indicate that the adults believe that the child will continue to reside there. If the child's future is unknown due to ongoing legal processes the message can be, "we need to tell your worker that you loved camping this year so the adults can plan for it next summer for you".

Understanding the child's history can also provide clues about the trauma and attachment disruption experiences that have impeded feelings of safety. Subsequently, we know that when children lack safety and function in survival mode, development is often delayed. This is why children can begin to 'catch-up' at surprising rates when placed in a foster home that matches their many needs.

Safety is the beginning of creating a successful placement. Safety lays a foundation for creating attachments. An informed foster parent that understands how to help kids and all members of the family to feel safe is contributing to the child's current and future ability to function in their many life spaces. They are providing a foundation for the child to be able to attach emotionally with a primary caregiver in the future.

It is also important for foster parents to understand the impor-

tance of parenting developmentally. The child in front of you may be 12 but at 4 years of age lived in an environment where developmental tasks were not nurtured due to issues that the family was experiencing. This becomes confusing when this same child sounds ‘parentified’ (and more like 15 years of age) and can tell other children what they need to do at chore time because it was their responsibility to manage these tasks in their homes of origin. The most common phrases used in your home can be things like, “in this home the adults are in charge” or “the only person’s behavior you need to focus on is your own because if we all look at working on our own goals we are all going to benefit”.

Traumatized children will present younger and older than their actual age dependent on the environmental triggers around them. If as foster parents we can create environments where kids can be kids and begin to experience safety we are then truly helping them to stabilize.

In my role as a therapist I will often invite foster parents to sessions; I believe strongly that the most important therapeutic work begins and is reinforced in the foster or adoptive home.

Theresa Fraser began her career as a Child and Youth Worker working with children and youth in mental health settings. Her parents were foster parents and she and her husband have been Treatment Foster Parents for over 23 years. She is also a Child and Family Therapist, Child Psychotherapist Play Therapist and has presented internationally to therapists and foster parents in Wales, Ireland, England, the USA and Canada. She is a Professor at Sheridan College in Ontario and is the President of the Canadian Association for Child and Play Therapy. One of her published works is a children’s book entitled Billy Had To Move: A Foster Care Story. She, her husband and her biological/adopted and foster children live in Ontario Canada with a dog, two cats and a gecko named Lily.



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