

FOUNDATIONS FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOSTER YOUTH



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER *for*
HEALTHY MARRIAGE *and* FAMILIES

TIP SHEET

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There are approximately 430,000 children and youth in foster care on any given day, according to the most recent Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data.¹ While many youth are resilient in the face of their removal, the reality is that being removed from a biological parent's care is a traumatic experience for a child, regardless of their age or circumstances at the time of removal. This is specially true for children in their early childhood years.

Research shows that undergoing adverse experiences early in life can have a significant impact on short term social and emotional functioning, as well as long-term stability of physical and mental health.² At the most basic level, this translates into youth having difficulties forming and maintaining healthy relationships with peers and adult figures throughout their lives.³ While a lack of supportive connections can lead youth to engage in unhealthy and harmful dating relationship patterns as they mature, there are things that you can do as a foster parent to encourage healthy relationship development.

Through simply acting as a stable, responsive and nurturing caregiver early in life, you can help increase a child's resilience by building in them strengths at the relational level.⁴ This relational skill building, known as a protective factor, can lead to an increase in well-being and positive long-term outcomes, especially in the areas of strong emotional health and relationship development, and an overall healthy way of reducing stress and regulating emotions.⁵

This tip sheet will provide caregivers with ways to be the support system that a child in foster care needs to help them develop the critical relationship skills necessary for future stability, healthy decision making, and overall growth.



PROVIDE YOUTH WITH A SAFE SPACE AND LET YOUR RELATIONSHIP DEVELOP NATURALLY

Children lose a lot during their initial transition to foster care. Not only have they been removed from their

biological parents' care, but they often times are uprooted and moved away from their friends, school, extended relatives, and sometimes siblings. While children need nurturing as they enter care, they also need time to process and grieve the relationships they've lost before they are ready to trust you as their new caregiver. By providing children with a safe space to express their feelings, and by demonstrating patience and empathy with them during this transition period, you will be modeling important skills needed to build trust and develop new relationships in a healthy manner.

Other ways to help ease this initial transition and support positive relationship development include:

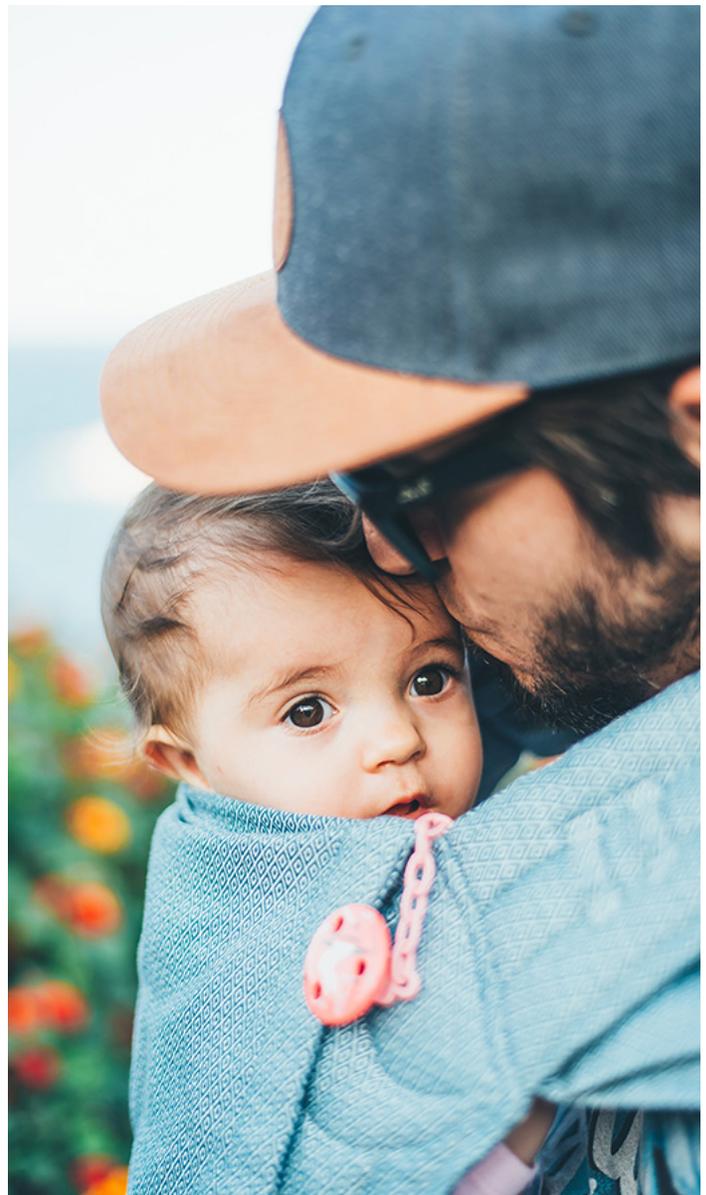
- Creating a structured environment by setting clear boundaries and expectations.
- Allowing children to control when they are ready to come to you for support.
- Letting children call you by a title that feels most comfortable to them (e.g., grandma, auntie, uncle, godmother, family friend).
- Being consistently available to listen when a child is ready and willing to talk.

MODEL HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP BEHAVIORS

Many children come into foster care from a home in which they may not have witnessed two parents managing conflict in a healthy way.

Modeling positive social interactions and positive conflict management between you and your spouse or other adult friends and family can increase the likelihood that as children mature, they will replicate these healthy behavior patterns, and, in turn, form healthy interpersonal skills that lead to healthy relationship choices in their teenage years.⁶

Some examples of how to model positive conflict management include:



- Keeping your voice and body language calm when speaking during a disagreement.
- Demonstrating the use of coping skills, when needed, to help self-regulate your emotions.
- Demonstrating how you lean on your own network of supportive friends, family, and neighbors for help, when needed.
- Waiting until you are calm to talk with your partner about a conflict that occurred.

REMEMBER: IT'S THE SIMPLE THINGS THAT COUNT, AND KIDS NOTICE!

Entering into foster care can come with a certain amount of stigma. Engagement in everyday normal activities, despite the abnormal experience of being in foster care, is an extremely important way to help children combat that stigma. Providing children with an opportunity to fully participate in regular childhood activities that they enjoy encourages the development of higher self-esteem and age appropriate social and behavioral skills.⁷ These experiences will also help youth build positive support networks and peer relationships,⁸ which become the building blocks for establishing healthy relationships in their later teenage years.

Simple things you can do to encourage a sense of normalcy and build self-esteem include:

- Taking the time to learn about what things interest children in your care, and supporting those interests.
- Enjoying one-on-one time with youth through everyday tasks, such as taking them shopping or out to dinner.
- Supporting their engagement in after school activities, community groups, or sports by providing transportation and covering initial sign-up fees.
- Celebrating moments when you see healthy peer relationships forming by encouraging sleepovers or weekend outings.

BEING A FOSTER PARENT CAN BE CHALLENGING – DON'T GIVE UP!

Foster caregivers are not always permitted to know the full extent of a child's history. Generally speaking, a child placed in foster care has experienced some type of abuse or neglect.⁹

In terms of behaviors, the effects of those experiences may manifest as acting out, testing boundaries, or pushing you away. In terms of relationship development, it may interfere with a child's ability to form an attachment, or bond, with you as their caregiver. When this happens,

Suggested Resource

Toxic Stress and Self-Regulation is a four-part series of reports from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. The series (1) explores the theoretical framework and model of self-regulation; (2) reviews the research related to self-regulation; (3) describes self-regulation interventions; and (4) outlines implications of research findings. These reports, plus snapshots of the research specific to toddlers, middle school youth, young adults, and more, can be found at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports>.

don't give up. Having realistic expectations for children placed in your home and supporting children even in times when their behavior may become difficult reinforces for that child that you will be there for them and supports the development of a healthy relationship built on trust.

Other ways you can support the development of a healthy attachment include:

- Demonstrating frequent, repeated positive experiences with your child, as this repetition may be what it takes before a child can begin to form a true bond with you.
- Understanding that a child's behavior may be connected to their previous trauma, and is not a personal attack on your parenting.
- Not giving up. And asking for help from your social worker or agency, or internal support system when a child's behavior becomes difficult.

SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIFELONG CONNECTIONS

Children and adolescents in foster care need long-term, supportive, and nurturing connections. The reality is that many foster youth lack these connections, and the longer they spend in care, the harder it is for them to learn

how to create this type of healthy bond.¹⁰ Constantly moving foster homes, changing social workers, having to adjust to multiple school placements, or a lack of a solid familial support system make it difficult for children to feel connected. Actively maintaining a relationship with a child, even after the time that they have left your home, can provide a critical factor of stability in a child's life – one that supports their long-term stability and healthy relationship growth.¹¹

Some examples of how you can support a child in their development of long-term relationships with yourself and other supportive figures include:

- Encouraging children to contact, visit, and interact with immediate and extended family members, when appropriate, who may remain in their life beyond the time the child welfare system is involved.
- Paying attention to the number of relationships a youth has with non-child welfare professionals, and encouraging interactions with non-system-based supportive figures.

- Not feeling pressured to talk about permanency with a child, but instead talking with them about how you can support them, however possible, after they leave your home.

CONCLUSION

Adverse childhood experiences, especially early in life, can have long-term implications for children as they learn to develop relationships and healthy coping skills. As a caregiver, you have the opportunity to serve as a positive role model offering empathy, compassion, and concern for a child struggling with the complexities of a life in transition. Modeling healthy relationship skills including positive communication and conflict management can establish a solid foundation for strengthening resiliency and developing healthy relationship skills that will serve them into adulthood.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on how you can support healthy relationship development during childhood, visit:

Zero to Three: Social and Emotional Development. <https://www.zerotothree.org/early-development/social-and-emotional-development>

Child Welfare Information Gateway: Resources on Nurturing and Attachment. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/promoting/protectfactors/nurture-attach/>

Respect! Conversation Starters: Respectful Relationships. <https://www.healthymarriageandfamilies.org/library-resource/respect-conversation-starters-respectful-relationships?backtosc=0&backtosc=0&page=3>



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⁴ See note 2 above.

⁵ Ibid.

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⁸ Ibid.

⁹U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013). Parenting a child who has experienced abuse or neglect. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/parenting-CAN/>

¹⁰ See note 6 above.

¹¹ See note 2 above.

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