

## Engaging Primary Families

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### Note Taking Guide

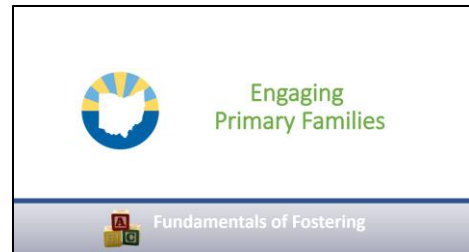
At the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Identify common barriers to strong relationships between foster families and primary families
- Discuss the how a child in care can be negatively impacted by losing their essential connections
- Discuss strategies you will employ to support positive relationships with primary families

### My Changing Family: An Overview

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- The Primary Family is the family that was caring for the child prior to placement and likely the family with which the child will live after leaving foster care. They can be family by blood, marriage, adoption, or non-relative kin.
- Relationships between the primary and foster families are recommended practice. The only reason a relationship with the primary family would not be best practice is if the child's safety is at risk.
- Even taking small steps towards relationships with primary families can yield benefits for you and the children in care.



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- Both foster families and primary families will have thoughts and feelings that could become barriers to relationship building. These include:
    - Fear for my family's safety
    - Anger that a vulnerable child must go through this
    - Lack of trust about the foster/primary family's ability to parent well
    - They won't hear or value my parenting advice
    - Concern their motives in caring for the child are not honorable
    - Adversarial positions within the case
    - The rights of the foster/primary parents are considered above the child's rights
    - Their values, beliefs and culture are too different from mine

- Foster caregivers occupy many roles, including roles that are not specifically related to foster care. These include:
  - Child/Sibling
  - Partner
  - Friend
  - Spouse
  - Parent
  - Employee
  - Employer
  - Team Member
  - Team Leader
  - Child Advocate
  - Family Advocate
- These roles can create barriers and demand competing and conflicting priorities that impact Important relationships in all areas, including with the primary family.
- To break these barriers:
  - Seek support
  - Change your perspective
  - Think outside the box
  - Be aware of conflicting roles
  - Address problems as they arise

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## **Tilling and Toiling: Why Would a Foster Family Go to All This Trouble**

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- Our essential connections give us a deep sense of belonging and affirm our diversity. We need these connections to grow and maintain healthy, happy, and fulfilled lives.
- The primary family is often the child’s essential connections. The loss of these essential connections can be traumatic.
- If we think of placement into care as like transplanting, we know how important it is to protect the roots. Building a relationship with the primary family is how we protect the child’s roots.



Important Areas of Life	My Response
How do I financially support myself and my family?	
What gives me a sense of joy?	
Who is important in my life?	
What is one of the most important groups I belong to?	
What do I do that gives my life meaning?	
What locations or places are important to me?	

*The Smith Case Study: Please read the scenario and answer the questions assigned to your group. Your group will be asked to report out your answers, particularly ideas that stood out to the group as being unique, simple to accomplish, or both.*

#### Smith Case Part One: Initial Placement

Jenna Smith is a single mother of three children, ages 6, 4, and 2. The father of Jenna's children is not involved. Jenna also has custody of her 14-year old sister, Angel, due to previous allegations Angel made two years ago against their mother's boyfriend, which the mother refused to believe.

Jenna is addicted to opioids and left the children in Angel's care to go "party." After two days, Angel also left the home to spend time with her 22-year-old boyfriend. Children Services became involved when a neighbor reported the three younger children were playing outside, unsupervised, at midnight.

You receive a call at three AM from the agency asking that you foster the three Smith children. You say "Yes."

It is reported, Jenna, their mother, is angry and blaming her 14-year-old sister for leaving the children alone. Angel is placed in the foster home of your friend.

#### Questions

1. What specific things would you do during your first meeting with Jenna?
2. How would you involve Jenna in the actual placement of the children in your home?
3. What activities might you do in the next few days to help minimize the trauma of separation and placement for the children?
4. What activities might you do during the children's visits with Jenna?
5. How would you assist the children to deal with the separation from Angel?
6. What values conflict and "old issues" might be at the root of the conflict between Angel and Jenna?

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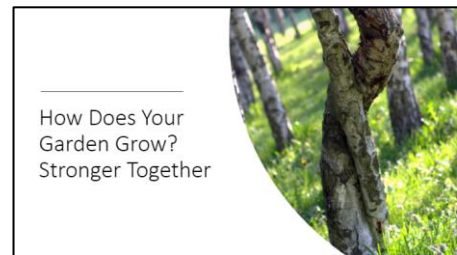
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## How Does Your Garden Grow? Stronger Together

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- Each team member brings strengths to the table. When everyone works together, the best possible outcomes for the child can be achieved. Some of the benefits of teaming include:
  - Quicker reunification
  - Personal Growth
  - Positive parenting Practices
  - Clear Expectations
  - Rewards
  - Continued Contact
  - Collaboration



- Emotions like fear, worry, and anger can distract from what is best for the child. Re-focusing on the child's best interest can undercut many emotional conflicts.
- By supporting the primary family, you are supporting the child.

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- Healthy boundary setting helps build trust and reduces misunderstandings. Boundaries give room for the relationship to grow but still allow each family a healthy independence.
- Examples of healthy boundaries:

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Smith Case Part Two: During Placement

As the case progresses, Jenna entered a live-in drug rehab where she visits with the children in the lobby for one hour once a week.

The three children miss their mother very much. They cry and have difficulty eating and sleeping. Jenna’s case plan is to complete the drug program, take parenting classes and find reliable childcare.

Angel acts withdrawn in the foster home. She cries much of the time and misses her sister and the children. She has tried to reconnect with her mother, who tells her she is a "tramp" and a "little liar."

Questions

1. What could you do to assist the children in maintaining a relationship with Jenna while she completes drug rehabilitation?
2. What things could you do to assist Jenna in completing her case plan?
3. How could you show Jenna you respect her as the children’s mother?
4. How could you work with Jenna to rebuild her relationship with Angel?
5. How could you assist the children in maintaining their relationship with Angel?
6. How could you support your family, including permanent children, in dealing with the stress of fostering three small children from a family very different from yours?

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**The Harvest: Permanency**

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- The hope is that the foster caregivers can maintain their connection with the child, no matter the reason for the child’s departure. If connections cannot be maintained, it can be traumatic for both the child and the foster family.



Smith Case Part Three: Reunification

After 9 months, Jenna has completed her in-patient drug rehabilitation program and is presently in after-care counseling.

Jenna has regularly visited with her children. The agency has determined that Jenna is ready to begin overnight visits and progress toward having the children placed with her again.

Jenna is concerned that she won't know what to do with the children on the long visits as she is "out of practice." She has also expressed concern that the children will not listen to her and that they no longer see her as their mother.

Angel has requested to remain in her current foster home at least until the end of the school year. The eventual plan for Angel, now 15, is to return to Jenna's home. Angel is making good grades in school, is planning for her 16th birthday party, and is talking of getting her driver's license.

Questions

1. How could you help the children prepare to return to their mother?
2. What are some ways you could help the children recognize the experiences they have had and the connections they have made while in your home?
3. How do you prepare Jenna for possible behavioral reactions of the children when they are returned to her?
4. How could you assist Jenna to assume the mother role in the life of her children?
5. What could you do to further help the relationship between Angel and Jenna?
6. What do you do to prepare yourself to say good-bye to the children?

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**Review and Reflect**

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- What was the barrier to working with primary families you wrote down at the beginning of class?
- What are three things you will take from this training that will help you bridge that barrier?



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## My Family Plan

### Suggested strategies at placement:

1. With the primary parent's permission, take a family picture. Explain the picture will be hung next to the child's bed and on our wall so that every member of our family knows who loves this child's and who we are working to reunite. Share copies with the primary family.
2. Work to secure the important first visit(s). Let the primary family see and hear you advocating for those visits to be scheduled immediately so the children and parents aren't wondering when they will see each other again.
3. Request a transitional item at the time of placement. This item can be a special toy or unwashed piece of the parent's clothing.

### Strategies I will use to develop a relationship with the primary family at the time of placement:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

### Suggested strategies during placement:

1. Create a visitation backpack with snacks, games, toys and activities. Use this only for visits so items remain fun and "new."
2. Send a journal back and forth to visits to share child's progress. Use the journal to praise the parent for things the child does well and ask them questions about the child's likes/dislikes, etc. Texting or writing allows the parent time to read and reread information and respond without the pressure for an immediate response and emotion of face to face conversation.
3. Partner with the primary parent to identify resources and services required in the case plan.
4. Invite primary parent to meet your family for a movie, bowling, pizza, mall play place, etc. Let them see you parent, laugh at yourself, accept help, etc.

### Strategies I will use to maintain my relationship with the primary family during the placement:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Suggested strategies to prepare for the child's departure:

1. Provide the life book and a transitional item to help the child feel connected to your home. This could be a special toy, article of your clothing or favorite family game, blanket or story book.
2. Develop a post care plan with input from the child and primary family to define what the ongoing relationship will look like. Be specific and realistic about what level of support you will be able to provide.
3. Plan a special celebration. If the child is not returning home, consider creating a 2nd life book for the primary parent and discuss how you can support each other through the change

Strategies I will use to maintain my relationship with the primary family while helping the child prepare to leave care:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

## RESOURCES

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PCSAO's webpage detailing the work of primary parents in Ohio:

<http://www.pcsao.org/programs/primary-parents>

Rise magazine, written by parents:

<http://www.risemagazine.org/about/>

Tip sheet for supporting reunification:

[https://co4kids.org/sites/default/files/Reunification\\_Tip\\_Sheet.pdf](https://co4kids.org/sites/default/files/Reunification_Tip_Sheet.pdf)

Resources on supporting reunification through relationships with the primary parents:

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/reunification/parents/reunification/>