The Family and Self-Esteem, Personal and Cultural Identity

The Role of Families

Families provide us with our personal identity, an understanding of our culture, and the connections that give us a sense of belonging and permanence. Children who need foster and adoptive families are often at risk regarding positive self-esteem, personal identity, and cultural identity. Self-esteem is jeopardized through the trauma of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and other forms of maltreatment. When the trauma of placement occurs, and children must deal with loss and separation, self-esteem and personal identity are further jeopardized. The foster care team has a responsibility to assist children to develop positive self-esteem, and to help them develop an understanding of who they are. The primary way the team can do this is by supporting family relationships.

Supporting the Development of Positive Cultural Identity

Toni Morrison, in her book *The Bluest Eye*, wrote about a young Black girl who wanted to have blue eyes so she could be as beautiful as all the blond-haired, blue-eyed children at school. She writes:

> *Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long time. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people.*[1]

A significant part of the way our identity develops has to do with how others see us, react to us, and provide feedback to us. We tend to pick up cues about who we are from other people. We begin to form our sense of who we are from the messages we receive from those who surround us. If others are continually reacting in a negative way to our "not having blue eyes," then it will be very difficult to see the beauty of any other color. As identity is developing, these messages can be very powerful.

Cultural identity is part of every child's development. Children develop values, life routines, communication patterns, and religious beliefs, as well as a taste for certain foods, and a knowledge of how life is celebrated and honored. Cultural identity also includes the development of racial identity. Remember, however, race is only one part of culture. Children may be from the same race, but there may still be differences in their overall cultural identity.

While race is only one aspect of culture, it is an aspect that often challenges us when working with children. Many of you may have wondered, "When do children begin to notice that skin colors differ?" You may wonder when and how it is appropriate to acknowledge differences.

The developmental model below can be very helpful in making these decisions. It applies to all children—regardless of their race—and how they begin to recognize and understand differences.

There are many factors that affect how children proceed through the stages of development, and this is also true with regard to how racial identity develops. However, we can define necessary tasks within approximate age ranges:

From birth–age 3, toddlers become aware of physical race and skin color difference and learn names for specific groups. They do not comprehend the real meanings of these labels and may be puzzled by the use of colors to describe people.

From ages 4–6, preschoolers can usually identify their own racial or ethnic group and may place a positive or negative value on their own and other groups. Feelings about groups are acquired by absorbing societal messages from the media, literature, toys, and their surroundings, even in the absence of contact or parent instruction.

From ages 7–11, children usually have a firmer understanding of their own racial and ethnic identity and—given the opportunity—will explore what it means to be a member of this group. This can be a prime age for participating in group activities with a cultural or educational focus, as well as a time when role models are especially important.

From ages 12–18, adolescents do a lot of exploration related to identity, including determining the significance of race, ethnicity, culture, adoption, and examining how these apply to the individual. Teenagers' past experiences with their racial identity are important, as those experiences determine whether their identity now is positive, negative, or in transition.

How the Team Works to Support Family Relationships

There are a variety of ways to support children's relationships with their families, including:

- Supporting family visits (family time).
- Talking to children about their family.
- Encouraging birth family participation in decision making for children (such as education, medical treatment, and services).
- Obtaining pictures of birth families for children.
- Taking children to visit their community/church/school.
- Planning for telephone calls and letters.
- Having children draw pictures/create artwork for their birth family.
- Respecting the possessions given to children by their family.
- Including the birth family in children's prayers at bedtime.
- Reassuring children that the birth family loves them despite the difficulties the family has had in meeting the children's needs.
- Being courteous and respectful to the birth family in front of the children.

- Not talking negatively about the birth family in front of or to the children.

- Asking for the birth parents' input or assistance on parenting issues (such as, types of food the children eat, favorite toys, etc.).

These examples fall into two categories—supporting family connections and promoting continuity. Family connections refers to ways that we help children maintain contact or continue to preserve connections to the family, culture, and community. When we talk about family continuity, we are referring to how we help children understand their history and attachments and losses over time.

The Eco-map as a Tool to Understand Family Relationships

When we are able to appreciate the importance and meaning of family relationships in our own lives, we can more easily understand their importance for children. As we look at our own families and realize the importance of family connections and family continuity, we are able to:

- better understand the impact our families have on our own identity, and therefore, better understand the role that birth families play in children's lives.

- better understand how our experiences with family relationships affect our ability in the five competency categories needed for fostering and adopting.

The genogram and eco-map are helpful tools for understanding family connections and continuity.

Supporting Family Connections and Family Continuity

When we seek to build, heal, or strengthen family connections we:

- Demonstrate unconditional acceptance of children.

- Show respect for children's connections.

- Help children to be more self-accepting.

When we try to break family connections we:

- Send a message that there is something bad about the children.

- Reject the children's family or community and, in effect, reject the children.

- Show the children that they cannot trust their new caregivers, in that they have already failed to meet needs for connection and belonging.

The most significant way for family connections to be supported is through the family visit or "family time." Research has consistently shown that family time is the key to reunifying families. If children spend family time with their parents frequently, they are more likely to return home. This is because the relationship and bond are maintained.

Successful family time:

- Reinforces children's identity.

- Helps children to know their parents are okay.

- Demonstrates to the children that the parents care for and love them.

- Gives children a sense of hopefulness.

- Helps alleviate children's guilt, and reinforces family strengths and competence.

The team must work together to effectively plan and prepare for family time. Planning must consider whether or not family time will be supervised, where family time will take place, its length, and frequency.

Members of the foster care team need to know that children are going to react to family time in a way that reflects where they are in the grieving process. While it may be difficult to predict how children will respond, it is best for everyone to expect some reaction—and to see this as a normal response.

We may want to protect children from contact with parents, the past, and their family. In protecting the children, we also want to protect ourselves—from having to handle the children's behaviors after family time, or from the discomfort we feel when we know children are in emotional pain. Yet we cannot protect children from contact with parents, the past, or the family—these are already a part of the children. It is our responsibility to help children manage their feelings. These feelings may be intense after family time.

Family time is the primary means to support family connections, other steps include:

- Involving parents in planning for and implementing placement.

- Continuing to recognize the parents' role in making decisions about children's lives (medical, educational, social).

- Using creative ways of supporting family connections. When parents are not available to children (illness, death, or emotionally distant), children can be encouraged to write letters, draw pictures, or make video or audio tapes.

- Provide children with information about their family and culture/community or extended family.

- Provide children with pictures.

- Simply talk to children about their family.

Adoptive parents may think that the topic of family time is not important to them. But it is important for adoptive families to think about family time too. First of all, the children you adopt have probably experienced family time in the past, even if family time is no longer taking place. These contacts will impact how children picture and remember their birth families. But sometimes, even when children are with adoptive families, family time may occur in the following situations:

- Children may not be free for adoption and parents may still have visiting rights. These family contacts are very important because they provide an opportunity for children and family to say goodbye. The quality of these contacts may greatly impact how the children remember the birth family and how children proceed to attach to the adoptive family.

- It may be in the best interest of children to continue contact with their birth family. This is done through what is called "open adoption." This is often done when children are older and have strong relationships with their families.

- If children are transitioning from a foster family to an adoptive family, visits with the foster family will promote a sense of continuity for children.

- If children are transitioning from kinship care to an adoptive family, visits with the kinship caregivers will promote a sense of continuity for the children.

Promoting Family Continuity

Children in family foster care risk losing family continuity:

- Separation from the birth family, even for a brief time, interrupts the continuity of the relationship.

- Lack of continuity, as well as the problems and needs that led to placement, may prevent the family from transmitting its own family history.

- Placement brings about a new family (or families), and children must integrate and understand each new experience of family living.

Resource parents, as part of a professional team, help children make peace with their past. We call it "using the present to deal with the past, to prepare for the future." You can think of it as "time traveling." It is an important role. Some of the things you can do to use this concept include talking with children about past experiences, helping children understand transitions and changes, taking pictures and recording children's life events while in your home, helping children obtain pictures or meaningful souvenirs, and respecting children's possessions.

There is also a tool, called the lifebook, that may assist you in working with children. Read more about this tool in the handout titled, "*Lifebooks, Lifebags, and Lifeboxes a Creative Approach to a Child's History*."

[1]Adapted from Crumbley, J. (1999). *Transracial Adoption and Foster Care. Washington*, DC: CWLA Press, 3–4.