

# fostering perspectives

MAY 2017 • VOL. 21, No. 2

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Sponsored by the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

## Healthy relationships and young people in foster care

The last issue of *Fostering Perspectives* talked about what resource parents can do to promote the physical health of the children in their care. Physical health is critical, but there are other dimensions of well-being to think about, including social and emotional health.

One way to touch on these other facets of well-being is to focus on **healthy relationships**. There are many definitions of a healthy relationship, but we are partial to the one Dionna (age 16) provides in this issue:

"Healthy relationships contain trust, loyalty, forgiveness, laughter, honesty, and unconditional love." As a resource parent, your success hinges in part on your ability to form this kind of bond with the kids in your care.

From this foundation you can help them maintain the links they already have and create new ones with supportive people and institutions. These strong connections can buffer children against many of the risks they face and help them learn the skills they need to succeed in life.

Of course, relationship building isn't always easy. It can take patience, persistence, and the courage to have uncomfortable conversations. It calls for an ongoing commitment to learning anything that might help your child. Like many of the best things in life, relationships are a journey, not a destination.

We hope the information, advice, and encouragement you find in these pages will be useful to you along the way.



## How we react and carry ourselves matters!

by Jeanne Preisler

"A smile can make all the difference."

I bet you have heard that expression before. Smiles are powerful. For most of us, our day

gets a little brighter when someone smiles at us. You may have even heard that smiles can be detected over the phone. A study from the University of Portsmouth demonstrated we actually can "hear" a smile in a person's tone of voice. Smiling is usually the best approach.

Usually, but not always. Imagine you are a 6-year-old girl. A stranger (a social worker) just removed you from the only home you have ever known. You are in a strange car. You're away from your parents and don't know what is happening with them. No one thought to pack your favorite stuffed animal and you have no idea how you will fall asleep without it.

You are scared, worried, and numb from all the chaos that has happened over the last few days. The car stops in a neighborhood that looks nothing like yours. The social worker takes your hand and walks you up to a house. Your heart is aching for your stuffed animal so much you can actually hear your heartbeat. It's beating fast, which makes you even more worried.

Knock. Knock. A woman and man open the

door. They're smiling from ear-to-ear. They're so happy to see you, they are beaming!

If you are that 6-year-old girl, what thoughts and feelings will you have when you see two strangers with big smiles on their faces—when your world has just fallen apart?

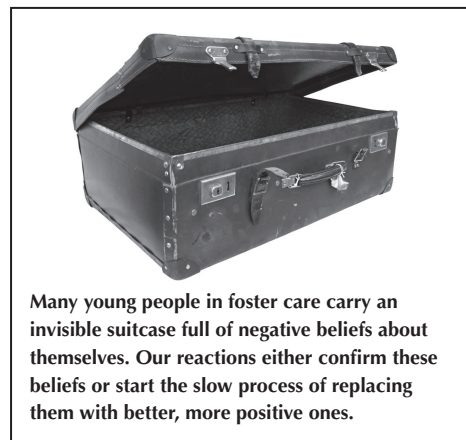
### Matching Our Reactions to the Child's Situation

It's important to match our reactions—even our facial expressions—to the child's situation. A warm, slight smile might be an appropriate way to greet our 6-year-old girl, but a broad, joyous smile is not.

In this article I would like to explore how, as resource parents and social workers, we can use our reactions—both to everyday events and to momentous ones, like reunification or graduation—to support young people's social and emotional well-being.

### Our Body Language Is Often Shouting

When social workers started asking young people specific questions about their trauma histories, they began to tell us about events they hadn't talked about before. Some of these events had to do with why the child entered foster care, but many had nothing to do with child abuse or neglect. They were just scary things these children had experienced. When we asked young people why they hadn't told



Many young people in foster care carry an invisible suitcase full of negative beliefs about themselves. Our reactions either confirm these beliefs or start the slow process of replacing them with better, more positive ones.

us before about these scary events they often said they didn't think we could handle it.

Even if we don't say it out loud, young people can sense when we are hesitant to talk about the traumas they have experienced. Whether we are a foster parent, social worker, or other caregiver, children can read our body language quite well.

But young people often misinterpret our trepidation. They may incorrectly think, *What happened to me was really, really bad. This adult is stressed out enough, telling my story may send them* *continued next page*

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over the edge. I better not share what happened. They haven't heard stories as bad as mine before.

Of course, this is not what we are thinking. We are just worried we'll mess up somehow, that we are not "qualified" or "prepared enough" to have a conversation about bad experiences. It would be easier to leave the difficult conversations up to a licensed professional. Plus, haven't we heard a million times that a young person does not want to tell their story over and over? But avoiding difficult conversations does not support the young person's social and emotional healing. In fact, avoiding, evading, or skirting around tough topics can exacerbate the challenges the child may be experiencing.

How we react and carry ourselves should always convey this message: *No matter what has happened to you, I am here to talk about it when you want to. You do not need to carry this scary thing all alone. There is nothing you can tell me that I cannot handle.*

## Repack Your Child's "Suitcase"

Many of our young people carry an invisible suitcase full of negative beliefs about themselves. Beliefs like: *I am not lovable. I will never be good enough. I am dumb. I am ugly. I am always disappointing people. What happened to me was my fault. I can never get anything right. I am just stupid.* Far too often, these beliefs have been deliberately instilled in them by others.

Your reactions either confirm the beliefs in their suitcase or start the slow process of replacing them with better, more positive beliefs.

What might repacking a child's suitcase look like in the real world? Let's answer this question by considering some common situations. At right are three columns: (1) a well-intended parental reaction to an issue; (2) what a young person might think after the parent's reaction; (3) an alternative approach that a parent could take. This third approach addresses the issue, but also tries to erode negative beliefs the young person may have about themselves and give them hope for the future.

Many young people are not consciously aware of their negative thoughts and beliefs. Your reactions and the messages you send can help children gradually become more aware of their negative self-talk. The more healing that happens, the more the young person will be able to discern for themselves which beliefs they should discard because they are untrue.

Until then, we need to use "universal precautions." We need to assume that every young person is carrying an invisible suitcase full of negative beliefs about themselves and the world, and that negative self-talk is happening

Initial Parental Approach	Young Person May Think	Alternative Parental Approach
"Something came up at work and I can't pick you up after practice. But I spoke to Mike's mom and she is going to drive you home, OK? I should be home by 7 p.m. and we can eat dinner together then."	<i>It's starting again. He doesn't really care about me. He is probably just going out for drinks with people from work. I can't count on him. I can't count on anyone but myself.</i>	"I want you to always feel you can count on me to be there for you. I want that more than anything because you are important to me. But, something came up at work and I need to stay late. This means we should decide together how best to get you home from practice. What do you think is a good plan? What would you like to do together after I get home?"
"Please chew with your mouth closed. I have asked you so many times. It is really unappealing and I don't want you grossing out your friends or teachers."	<i>I can't change everything all at once. I'll never fit in here. I'll never be what you want me to be. I should just leave now before you kick me out.</i>	"I know we've talked before about you chewing with your mouth closed. It must be really hard to change something you have done for so long. You have an awesome future ahead and I think this could help you along the way. Can you think of anything we could do together to help you break this habit?"
"Please stop playing so rough with the dog. When his ears go back, that means he is not enjoying it. I don't want the dog to get hurt or to bite you."	<i>You care more about the dog than you do about me. Even dogs are more lovable than me. No one will ever love me. I hope the dog bites me and then maybe my social worker will just move me from this house. I don't like dogs anyway.</i>	"I see you are playing rougher than usual with the dog. That is not safe for you or the dog. I love you both, and I don't want anything bad to happen to either of you. Did something happen today to make you upset or worried?"
"I know you can do better in school. You are just not applying yourself. You are smarter than this."	<i>I am not smart. I am dumb. I am trying and I just don't understand this stuff, and I never will.</i>	"School seems to be a real struggle for you right now. I believe in you. You have a great future ahead of you. We can get through this together. How can I help?"
"I'm excited you'll be living with your family again. I know you missed them a lot while you stayed with us. But I will also really miss you."	<i>I want to go home, so why am I so scared? I bet you are just happy to get rid of me. I doubt you'll miss me at all. I'm nothing. Why would you miss me?</i>	"This is a big day. I bet you have a ton of different feelings happening all at once. I am so happy I got to know you. The real you. You are so special. Your mom and I talked and I really want to remain in your life however you would like me to. We could write, or call, or Facetime, or you can even come spend the night if you like. I'm sure it will be an adjustment moving back home, but you got through the adjustment of living with us, and that was probably even scarier. You've got this. I know you can do it. You have great things in your future."

inside their heads whether they can articulate it or not.

We must each do our best to reinforce positive beliefs during every interaction with our children. Luckily, there is a pretty easy framework we can use. Just keep in mind three words: safe, capable, and lovable. If you can help a young person feel safe, capa-

ble, and lovable during your interactions, you can improve their social and emotional well-being. And you will probably make them smile more, too! And, as we know, that can make all the difference.

*Jeanne Preisler, a Program Consultant with the NC Division of Social Services, is leading an effort to help our child-serving system become more trauma-informed.*