

The Role of Resource Parents in Building Alliances with Parents of Children in Foster Care*

Recognize and support parent strengths

The best place in most cases to begin working with a parent of a child in foster care is to begin looking for the parent's strengths. The parents obviously have needs or their child would not have been placed in care. But we are beginning our work with them counterproductively if we focus our attention too tightly on those needs. When we see only a parent's needs, we are defining the parent in our minds in a negative way. When we have defined the parent in our minds in a negative way, it is difficult for us to be or even seem genuinely engaged in working with him or her. By contrast, when we recognize a parent's strengths, we feel better about working with him or her, and we will have a positive place to begin talking and working with that person.

Use strengths to engage parents

Once you have recognized a parent's strengths, you can use the following questions to create ways to use those strengths to build a partnership with the parents:

- How can I use that strength to begin engaging parents to work with me in partnership?
- What is something I as a team member might want from this parent who has this strength?
- What is something I as a team member might offer to this parent based on this strength?
- What is something this parent might want from me as a team member based on this strength?

Maintain Confidentiality: There are rules and restrictions about confidentiality and what information agency staff can share, even with fellow team members such as resource parents. However, parents themselves may share information with resource parents. All personal information must be held in confidence, with the understanding that resource parents must share information with the agency staff. Parents need to know that agency staff and resource parents share information.

Even when policy supports agency staff sharing certain information with resource parents, some agencies may interpret policy conservatively. In this case the agency's procedures restrict sharing information; thus, the agency perceives a barrier to sharing

such information, though there is in reality no legal or policy barrier. It will be healthy if agencies revisit their procedures around the sharing of information to ensure that they are not being counter-productively restrictive. Resource parents should have complete access to information that is relevant. The obvious question arises from what is or is not “relevant.” For example, a mother may have had an affair during her marriage when her child was living with her. The child does not know about the affair, but the husband knows about the affair and his anger may cause the marriage to fall apart. Should the caseworker tell the resource parents about this? In many cases, the resource parents would have no need for the worker to share this information. However, if the parents fight about this issue every time the child comes home, the child could be sufficiently affected that the worker would need to tell the resource parents so they would be able to perform their role and responsibilities. The resource parents would be responsible for holding the family’s information in confidence.

Manage Personal Emotions: It is a natural human response to feel strong emotions when learning of a child’s suffering. While the “Alliance Model of Child Welfare Practice” readily recognizes the validity of such emotions, it also takes a practical approach toward attempting to help parents change so they will no longer behave in a way that makes resource parents and workers feel anger, disgust or some other negative emotion. Resource parents may ask themselves, “How can I be respectful to someone who did those things?” The answer is that a positive, constructive working relationship is the most effective route to help the parent never again do “those things.”

Resource parents may be judging the parent by the worst thing that parent ever did in his or her life. All of us probably have a worst thing that we did in our lives, and we do not want to be judged by that forever. How would any of us feel if we were judged by the worst thing we ever did? A foster parent could be an important part of the process of helping that parent change. Even in the case of adoption, adoptive parents will need to talk with children about what happened in their past and to be able to do it in a way that is not condemning of the parents.

Also resource parents may be surprised upon getting to know the parent that they are better able to empathize with the parent. For example, we may care for a boy who was sexually abused by his father. Initially we may think the father must be a monster and wonder how anyone could possibly expect us to treat him with respect. But what if we learn the father as a boy was also sexually abused by his own father? Suddenly we have a glimpse past the “monster” we had previously seen the father to be, and we instead are able to see a human being in pain and confusion. We see that although this father indeed committed a monstrous act, he is not a monster; rather, he went through

experiences as a boy that confused him about what is acceptable in how fathers relate to sons. When we realize this, we can begin supporting this person to help him find a way to parent that will take the pain away not only from his son, but also from himself.

A place for resource parents to start working with a caseworker in such a situation is for them simply to think together about the best starting place in working with such a parent in a constructive way with a goal of reunification. The foster parent will eventually need to be in the parent's presence, if only at a planning meeting, so the foster parent will need to think of what would contribute to his or her comfort so that the foster parent and the parent will be able to contribute to the child's plan.

There are ways for resource parents to show respect for parents without having direct contact with the parents. A foster parent must realize that as long as the child is in his or her house, the foster parent has a relationship to the parent through the child, because the child will be bringing memories of the parent into the foster parent's house. The way the foster parent talks to the child around these memories and the issues related to these memories is a crucial starting point.

Team members might feel safety risks in working closely with some parents. Team members should not feel that to implement the alliance model of practice they must be prepared to jeopardize their safety. Workers and resource parents should follow a standard practice of never being alone with anyone with whom they feel unsafe. Team members may be concerned that some parents in some situations might become angry, out of control or might show up at their house, perhaps intoxicated. When resource parents participate in developing a plan with the workers, they can plan for these possibilities. An obvious action in such situations is to call the police. However, plans should also be developed to avoid such crisis measures and to avoid resource parents feeling vulnerable. Such plans would involve progressions which ensure safety at each step, starting with in-office contacts, progressing to exchange of visits, then progressing to a neutral setting. If a parent is violent and out of control, the plan would include only in-office visits until this pattern of behavior alters. In such cases, if the resource parents want the location of their home kept secret, the caseworker should support them in this. A particularly volatile case might never progress beyond in-office visits.

A key dimension of the alliance model centers around how decisions are made in teams. Working in teams, workers will be more positioned to hear resource parents' input, rather than workers being positioned so they are more likely to have to rely on "pulling rank" over resource parents in making decisions. Sometimes resource parents as team members may be wrong, of course, so that a caseworker may need to make

the final decision. By the same token, caseworkers can be wrong, and, if a foster parent feels strongly about his or her view, the foster parent could request that someone else — perhaps the caseworker’s supervisor — be brought in so that the foster parent’s concerns could be included on the record. In such a case, it would be best for resource parents to be able to cite examples of behavior, rather than their own feelings. For example, a foster parent may be concerned about the child’s safety when the parents use alcohol or other drugs; this foster parent would be behaviorally oriented in describing a mother by saying, “The mother has had alcohol on her breath the last three times I saw her, and she acted intoxicated. No one has done a drug screen to determine if she is using drugs or alcohol.”

Share Power and Control: When parents are brought into decision-making, they will be more invested in contributing to a process which they helped to plan. In the partnership/teamwork approach, more information is available. First, caseworkers and resource parents gain more firsthand information from interacting with parents. This added information aids in decision-making. Second, when parents are included in partnership, they gain more first-hand information about the caseworker and resource parents, which could build trust.

When caseworkers rely too heavily on their personal power to move a case forward, they may not always be aware of how ineffective their power is in real terms. Power often only lasts as long as the person with the power is there to enforce it. When a caseworker or a foster parent is in the room with parents, he or she might be very powerful; however, when the parents are away from the caseworker or resource parent and have the child, they can be very powerful. The alliance model seeks a greater degree of shared influence to influence people’s actions and behaviors beyond what happens in a room during a meeting, or in a foster home during a visit. A parent’s personal investment in a process often does not come out of response to power; rather, parents’ personal investments derive from their wanting the same goals and their being willing to achieve those goals.

Model Effective Parenting Skills, Mentor and/or Teach Parents: When there is direct contact between resource parents and parents, the resource parents often serve as mentors or teachers. Minimally, they model effective parenting for the parents whose children are in foster care. Sometimes the process is formalized; sometimes it is informal. Good teachers do four things. First, teachers or mentors share practical information. For example, resource parents may be in a position to teach a parent about grieving behaviors, in order to normalize angry and depressed behaviors in children. Second, teachers or mentors provide examples or applications for the information. For example, a foster parent trying to teach a parent ways to handle grieving behavior may explain specific ways a child has reacted to loss and specific

ways the foster parent effectively dealt with the child's behavior. Third, teachers or mentors give the learner an opportunity to practice. In the case of a foster parent teaching a parent about dealing with grieving behaviors, perhaps the foster parent can facilitate a discussion between the parent and child. Fourth, teachers or mentors provide feedback. Without feedback the learner doesn't know what was done well, or poorly. So, resource parents need to tell parents specifically what they did that was effective, as well as offer suggestions.

* Adapted from material developed by Thomas D. Morton, Child Welfare Institute.