

**British Columbia Foster Care
Education Program**

**CARING FOR CHILDREN:
EFFECTS OF CAREGIVING**

Ministry of Children and Family Development

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About the Author

Leslie Welin, M. Ed., is a faculty member in Child and Youth Care Programs at Malaspina University-College. She has a Masters degree in Counselling Psychology from the University of Alberta. Prior to joining Malaspina, Leslie worked in a number of settings, including schools and private practice, with children, youth, and families. She has conducted numerous workshops with foster parents, social workers, mental health professionals, law enforcement and medical personnel on child development, the impact of trauma on children and youth, and guiding children's behaviour.

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INTRODUCTION



Introduction

A. RATIONALE

Following a report by the United States General Accounting Office that the foster care system was in a state of crisis, Denby, Rindfleisch and Bean (1999) conducted a study about foster parent satisfaction and intent to continue to foster. Findings suggested that what was needed to increase foster parent satisfaction and retention included support from government staff in terms of building and maintaining a working relationship with foster parents, training to help manage the extremely difficult experiences and behaviours that children bring with them into care, and recognition of the experiences and training that foster parents bring with them. These recommendations are similar to those of the British Columbia report of the Task Force on Safety for Child and Youth in Foster or Group Home Care (1997).

Between 1995 and 1999, the number of children in care has increased resulting in the need for skilled and compassionate caregivers. In the past, some caregivers have felt unsupported and undervalued. This has contributed to turnover of foster homes, resulting in changes in placement for some children in care.

In order to support and to retain caregivers, it is necessary to explore the effects of caregiving on foster parents. What are the impacts on natural families, extended families, neighbourhoods and communities? What are the sources of caregiver stress? How do caregivers cope and what are their sources of support?

Caregiving for children and youth can be very demanding for any parent. Caregiving for children and youth who have experienced removal from their homes and the abuse and/or neglect that led to that removal can be even more taxing. Hurt and lonely, some may lash out at caregivers, others may show no emotion, and still others may appear happy. The caregiver is the frontline person witnessing the struggles and triumphs of children and youth-in-care on a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week basis.

Looking at the realities of caregiving and the effects on self, family, extended family, neighbourhood, and community is important to retaining caregivers. Providing opportunities for caregivers to discuss what they value about their relationships with children and youth, their strengths and challenges, and to recognize and develop support systems that contribute to

strengthening the caregiving system in British Columbia is important.

B. CUSTOMIZING AND CORE THEMES FOR TRAINING

This training is a joint project of the British Columbia Federation of Foster Parent Associations and the Ministry for Children and Families. A set of core themes runs throughout all training modules. They are:

- Vulnerability of all children and youth-in-care
- Teamwork
- Child and youth development
- Communications
- Guiding children's behavior
- Family support
- Diversity
- Inclusion
- The Ministry for Children and Families Guardianship Model.

C. LEARNING OUTCOMES

The caregiver can:

- compare the reasons that drew her to caregiving with the realities of caregiving to date.
- identify sources and signs of caregiver stress and impacts of caregiving on self.
- describe the possible impacts of caregiving on self, family, extended family and relationships within the caregiver's neighbourhood and community.
- identify and describe resiliencies in her own life.
- identify formal and informal sources of support.

C. PREPARATION

The "Caring for Children: Effects of Caregiving" module consists of a single, three hour session. Foster parents should be familiar with the material in the course. Read it thoroughly and imagine yourself going through the various exercises and activities. Think of examples you might reflect upon.

INSTRUCTIONS



Materials:

Handouts

- Handout #1 Title Page “Effects of Caregiving”
- Handout #2 Learning Outcomes
- Handout #4 Participation Guidelines

Overheads

- Overheads #1 Title Page “Effects of Caregiving”
- Overheads #2 Learning Outcomes
- Overheads #4 Participation Guidelines

Note that the training is a joint initiative of the British Columbia Federation of Foster Parent Associations and the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

2. COMPARING REASONS FOR CAREGIVING WITH THE REALITIES OF CAREGIVING

(30 minutes)

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can compare the reasons that drew her to caregiving with the realities of caregiving to date.

Materials:

paper
pens

Instructions:

In Pre-Service Orientation, you were asked to explore your reasons for wanting to foster. In exploring your reasons, you were asked to look at lifestyle changes, how your own needs would be met, what you knew about raising children, how your family felt about being a foster family, the impact on your own relationships, and how you felt about the child/youth's family.

Before completing this section, you may want to read the details of questions people were asked to consider in the Pre-Service Orientation which are included at the end of this section.

Keep in mind that what we believe and value about ourselves, other people, and the world influences our thoughts, feelings and behaviours as caregivers. Clarifying our values or what is important to us can provide an understanding of the basis for our actions.

Exercise:

Please reflect on the following questions:

1. What is important to you about being a caregiver?
2. Why is that important to you?
3. Have your reasons for caregiving changed and become clearer since you first became a caregiver?

Some examples you may have thought about could be: making a contribution, keeping busy, finding out what makes people tick, having things safe and secure, having a job, excitement.

- In your reflections, what, if any, changes have there been in your original reasons for becoming a caregiver?
- What has made your role as a caregiver worthwhile for you?

List comments on the paper and look for any themes in terms of value statements.

Sometimes our hopes and dreams about helping others may not be realized or evolve as we anticipated.

Pre-Service Orientation Questions

Is Caregiving For Me?

Here are some questions for you to consider before you decide whether or not you want to be a Foster Parent. Taking a child into your home and family is a very important decision and the following questions are designed to help you make a decision that is right for you.

How will my lifestyle change if I become a foster parent?

1. Do I have the time and energy to care for a foster child?
2. Am I willing to spend more time at home and socialize less?
3. Can I afford my own expenses, knowing that the compensation for having a foster child will be only enough for the child's needs?
4. Am I willing and able to take a child to counselling sessions, medical appointments, court hearings and other regular appointments, as well as participate in them?
5. Can I accept the additional "clutter" that will result from additional children in the home?

How can I benefit from being a foster parent?

1. Do I like doing things with children?
2. How will I view a child's different values and ideas?
3. Why do I really want to take a foster child into my home?
4. What satisfaction do I hope to attain (money, community approval, love, affection)? Is this realistic?

What do I know about raising a child?

1. How do I deal with my own frustration and anger? How do I handle other people's frustration and anger?
2. Is it easy for me to show affection?
3. What is discipline to me? Am I open to new ideas?
4. What will I do if a child does not totally cooperate with me, or refuses to follow my rules?
5. Can I keep the information that I learn about a child confidential?
6. What are my greatest strengths that will be useful in caregiving?
7. Can I really accept and respect differences in values and ideas?
8. Can I maintain a positive attitude and continue to work with a child in the absence of positive change?

How does my family feel about being a foster family?

1. Have I asked my partner if she wants to share her life with a foster child?
2. Are we secure and stable enough in our relationships to add a foster child to our family? Will this cause undue stress?
3. How will my children accept another child into their lives? Do they want to share their rooms, toys, friends and parents with another child?
4. How will I feel about a child being removed from my home?
5. How will my children feel/react if most of my attention is focused on helping children new to our home?
6. What if my children learn problematic behaviours from the foster children?
7. What if a foster child's anger is directed at my children or vice versa?

How do I feel about the child's parents?

1. How do I feel about the child's birth parents and the problems they may have?
2. Am I able to understand that a child still loves her parents and that I should support this relationship?
3. How will I feel about working toward reunifying the child and her parent?
4. What if I really don't like the parents and don't believe the children should return home and yet that is the plan?

3. SOURCES AND SIGNS OF CAREGIVER STRESS

(35 minutes)

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can identify sources and signs of caregiver stress and impacts of caregiving on self.

Materials:

Handouts

- Handout #5 Responding to Stress
- Handout #6 Stress Response Cycle
- Handout #7 Balance
- Handout #8 Common Symptoms of Stress
- Handout #9 Readings About Stress and Self-Care

Overheads

- Overhead #5 Stress Response Cycle

A. Understanding Stress

Instructions:

This section looks at sources of stress, how stress impacts caregivers, and strategies for self-care. Some symptoms of stress are outlined in Handout #8, "Common Symptoms of Stress" and in preparation for the visualization which follows, the foster parent should be aware of the areas where symptoms may present: physical, mental, emotional, social and/or spiritual dimensions of self.

Exercise:

We would invite you to participate in a guided visualization. Please reflect on things in your caregiving relationships that annoy you, drain your resources and worry you. A few example triggers are (always on the go to appointments with ministry workers, therapists, schools; conflict between children; finding time to talk with your partner). Please pick one trigger and focus on a time when you were experiencing that trigger. As you think about that time, notice what was happening, who was there, noticing any sounds, sights, smells, etc. As you visualize the situation, pay particular attention to what is happening in your bodies and what feelings you are having. After a few minutes, please jot down some of their experiences in the appropriate spaces on Handout #5, "Responding to Stress."

Reflect upon the following questions:

- What were some of the triggers or sources of stress that you identified?
- As a result of the stress, what negative things happened?
- As a result of the stress, what positive things happened?
- Is what happened what you wanted to happen?

In summary, while recognizing stress is important, stress is not always negative. It is a non-specific body response to a demand. It is necessary to our survival. When stress becomes prolonged or frustrating, it can become distress. Humans are wired to fight, flee or freeze. Use Handout #6, "Stress Response Cycle," and Overhead #5, "Stress Response Cycle," to understand what typically happens when humans experience stress.

B. Responding to Stress

Instructions:

We all develop ways to cope with stress. Use Handout #7, "Balance." In order to take care of ourselves, we need to care for each of the dimensions of self. Draw a replica of the "Balance" handout on your paper. Think of a couple of ways for each dimension in which you take care of yourself. List these on the paper.

Summary Remarks:

Handout #9, "Readings About Stress and Self-Care" and Handout #10, "Pressures on a Caregiver." Should be read.

4. IMPACTS OF CAREGIVING

(20 minutes)

Learning outcome:

The caregiver can describe possible impacts of caregiving on self, family, extended family and relationships within the caregiver's neighbourhood and community.

Materials:

Handouts

- Handout #10 Pressures on a Caregiver
- Handout #11 Impacts of Caregiving

Overheads

- Overhead #6 Pressures on a Caregiver
- Overhead #7 Questions for Implications for Caregiving

Other

- paper and pen

Instructions:

We have highlighted some of the stresses for caregivers, as well as some of the ways used to cope with or manage those stressors. One of the keys to managing stress positively is to find balance in your life.

An individual's balance can be affected by other systems that interact with her, particularly family. Handout #10, "Pressures on a Caregiver" (Overhead #6, "Pressures on a Caregiver"). Relationships are two-way and each area of various relationships is affected by the foster parent.

Note the realities and the range of needs which exist for children experiencing care and the range of abilities required for caregivers to support and nurture a child or youth's healthy development. A caregiver's family's stage of development and the needs of natural family members may influence that ability. You may want to reflect on some examples of the needs of a family with pre-schoolers, school-aged children, and teens and how the needs of children in care may not be compatible with the family's stage of development.

Exercise:

Using Handout #11, "The Impacts of Caregiving," we invite you to brainstorm a list of events, behaviours or other circumstances related to caregiving for children and youth that impact your natural family members. List these on paper. A few examples (sharing toys and friends, name calling among children/youth, children/youth who have been a part of the family for a long time who are leaving, your natural child feeling you are spending too much time with the child or youth-in-care).

Summarize common impacts of family stress. Visualize a mobile. Families are like mobiles in that if one part changes or is impacted in some way, the other parts move to adjust to the change. The interconnectedness of family members means that the entire family is affected by what one member does.

By providing care for children and youth challenges caregivers to be aware of family roles, rules, boundaries, communication styles, ways of making decisions and solving problems. All of these may be impacted by providing care.

Refer back to Handout #11, "Impacts of Caregiving."
Brainstorm impacts you have noticed in the other areas of extended family, neighbourhood and community.

Reflect upon questions on Overhead #7, "Questions for Implications for Caregiving."

- Were the impacts mostly positive or negative?
- What are the implications of the impacts for your relationships with immediate family members, extended family members, neighbors, the community?
- As you consider the implications, how is your intent to continue to foster impacted?

Summary Remarks:

Reflect upon any insights or observations you may have had from the exercise.

Please remember that there are positive and negative impacts on self and relationships when working with other people. Being aware of what happens for us, paying attention to it, and taking care of ourselves is vital to our ability to provide a safe and nurturing environment in which children and youth can develop and grow.

5. RESILIENCE

(25 minutes)

Learning outcome: The caregiver can identify and describe resiliencies in her own life.

Materials:

Handouts

- Handout #12 Resilience
- Handout #13 Resilience Exercise

Overheads

- Overhead #8 Key Traits of Resilience

A. Personal Limitations

Exercise:

Invite participants to experiment with their limitations.

- Stand and find a space where you can stretch your arms.
 - Face the front of the room with your feet about shoulder width apart and stretch out your right arm.
 - Turn to the right stretching back as far as you can, but don't hurt yourself.
 - Note where your head and eyes are by noticing a spot on the wall.
 - Ask yourself if that was the best you could do.
 - Please face the front of the room again.
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- Move your head to the right, but turn your eyes to the left. Hold this position and turn your body as far to the right as you can.
 - Turn back to the front.
 - Move your head and eyes to the left. Turn your body to the right.
 - Turn back to the front.
 - Turn your head left and your eyes right. Hold this position and turn your body as far to the right as you can.
 - Turn back to the front.
 - With your right arm outstretched, reach as far to the right as you can. Note the spot on the wall that you can see now.
 - How far did you go this time? (most people go further than they did the first time).

Source: Fewster, G. (1996). Child and Youth Care Orientation, Nanaimo, BC.

B. Resilience

Instructions:

We can do more than we believe and all of us are capable of change. When we experience adversity, it can be difficult to believe that we can move forward. The ability to bounce back from adversity is called “resilience.”

The key concepts of resilience can be found in Overhead #8, "Key Traits of Resilience."

Self-esteem - a belief in your own ability to do difficult tasks and to continue when it appears impossible, a sense of your own worth as a person and a conviction that you can cope successfully with life's challenges.

A sense of control - a belief that we have control over positive outcomes in our lives and the ability to act, an internal locus of control.

A sense of hope or a positive attitude - a sense of hopefulness and positive temperamental characteristics, an enjoyment of life, a lively sense of humor, the capacity to forgive, a strong sense of belonging.

Availability of a support system - concern by others.

Ability to adopt a working style of detached concern - a blend of empathy and objectivity, being concerned about the well-being of others while establishing boundaries about whose life it is.

Refer to Handout #12, "Resilience," for more information.

Exercise:

Using Handout #13, "Resilience Exercise," take about 10 minutes to reflect on the questions in the handout.

Identify two resiliencies you might have in common with your partner or another caregiver. Record your comments on paper.

Summary Remarks:

In summary, developing resiliencies requires opportunities to practice the behaviours that are connected to resilience. That means having the opportunity to set goals, to work in collaboration with others, to solve problems, to make choices, to feel connected to others, to look at the consequences of behaviour, to be responsible for our own behaviour and to know that you truly matter. You are encouraged to look for ways to support and acknowledge your own resilience.

Resilience is important to children or youth-in-care. Identifying the conditions necessary for the development of resilience in children and youth is explored in detail in the "Guiding Behaviour" and "Child Development" modules.

6. FORMAL AND INFORMAL SOURCES OF SUPPORT

(25 minutes)

Learning outcome:

The caregiver can identify formal and informal sources of support.

Materials:

Handouts

- Handout #14 My Sources of Support

Overheads

• Overhead #9 My Sources of Support

Instructions:

Achieving what we hope for requires support from those we work with and from our family and friends. Forming relationships that give us a sense of belonging, being supported and being cared for is often left to chance.

Exercise:

Please refer to Handout #14, "My Sources of Support." Briefly respond to each area. You may want to give some examples.

Informal sources of support - list family and friends to whom you can turn to in getting your needs met (indicate what those needs are, for example, love, fun, a listening ear).

Formal sources of support - in your role as a foster parent, list those people to whom you turn to in getting your needs met (indicate what those needs are, for example, information about supporting the child or youth, paperwork).

Using the questions on Overhead #9, "My Sources of Support," Please jot your responses down on a piece of paper.

Summary Remarks:

Getting the support we want and need is not about complaining, but is about developing some workable strategies. Remember that one of the resiliencies is the availability of a support system. Research indicates that resilient people will look for support.

7. CLOSURE

(10 minutes)

Objective:

To bring the session to a close.

Materials:

Handouts

- Handout #15 Suggested Resources

Instructions:

Please take a couple of minutes and reflect on one thing that you learned today in relation to the effects of caregiving.

Refer to Handout #15, "Suggested Resources."

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