

**British Columbia Foster Care
Education Program**

**CARING FOR CHILDREN:
THE CHILD'S FAMILY**

(3 hours)

Ministry of Children and Family Development

July 2002

About the Authors

This module reflects the collaborative work of individuals at Malaspina University-College, Camosun College, and the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

A. RATIONALE FOR TRAINING

Foster parents are encouraged to maintain contact with a child's family in accordance with the child's plan of care. The Child, Family and Community Service Act (Guiding Principles [section 2], Service Delivery Principles [section 3], Best Interests of Child [section 4] and the Standards for Foster Homes [Standards A.2 and C.2]) identify the legislative imperative to maintain involvement of families where children are placed in-care.

Research in child welfare highlights the importance to the child in care of maintaining or strengthening family relationships.

It is important for foster parents to be involved with the child's family because most children return home (80% within 12 months) and a successful return home is more likely when the family remains involved.

Children retain a strong emotional tie to family no matter what type of care they have received. Separation from attachment figures, such as parents and siblings, can have profound effects on a child's development. (Bowlby, 1968; Fahlberg, 1991; Steinhauer, 1991). Studies also indicate that children who grow up in-care and who lose contact with parents, siblings, and other family members often fail to develop a sense of belonging, potentially leading to emotional and behavioural problems.

For Aboriginal children in care, the effects of losing contact with their families and Aboriginal communities can be particularly devastating, contributing to overwhelming feelings of alienation and loss.

The focus of this module is to increase understanding about the crucial importance of the family to the child and to develop the skills and approaches needed to involve and support the child's family while the child is in-care.

B. LEARNING OUTCOMES

The caregiver can:

1. identify specific reasons why family is important to a child.

 2. describe emotions and behaviours that families may present as a result of the removal and placement of a child.

 3. identify and describe the roles of caregivers when working together with the child's family.

 4. describe ways of involving the child's family during removal; placement; and, where applicable, the reunification process.

 5. identify and describe skills when working with the child's family.
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C. PREPARATION

The Child's Family module consists of one three-hour session.

Foster parents should be familiar with the material in this module and should review the Child, Family and Community Service Act, particularly Ch. 46, Part 1, Section 2, #2, 3 and 4 (See Overhead #3). Caregivers should also be familiar with the Standards for Foster Homes; Standards A.2 and C.2 (See Handout #3, "Standards for Foster Homes").

Read the module thoroughly, and imagine yourself going through the various exercises. Think of examples you might have from your own life experiences. Make notes as you go through the exercises.

The Instructions provide an overview of each topic and list the relevant learning outcomes, materials and preparation required, as well as providing instructions on the content, delivery, and time frame for each learning activity.

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INSTRUCTIONS

**OVERVIEW FOR CARING FOR CHILDREN:
THE CHILD'S FAMILY**

1. Importance of the Child's Family
(40 minutes)

 2. The Child's Family Reactions to Separation
(30 minutes)

 3. Caregiver Roles and Responsibilities
(15 minutes)

 4. Involving the Family
(25 minutes)

 5. Building Relationships with Families
(35 minutes)
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INSTRUCTIONS

- Handout #2 Learning Outcomes
- Overheads
- Overhead #2 Learning Outcomes

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHILD'S FAMILY

(40 minutes)

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can identify specific reasons why family is important to a child.

Material:

Handouts

- Handout #3 Standards For Foster Homes
- Handout #4 The Importance of the Child's Family

Overheads

- Overhead #3 Child, Family and Community Service Act
- Overhead #4 The Importance of the Child's Family

Other

- paper
- pen

Instructions:

In this part of the module, foster parents will explore why the child's family is so important to the child in care. When caregivers learn more about why family is crucial to the child, they will be able to respond to the child's family with more understanding, empathy, and support. This session is designed in three parts. Part A is a short presentation to provide participants with relevant information. Part B involves a personal, private family reflection exercise to encourage caregivers to think back on their own family life and reflect on how their experiences have influenced why family is important to them. These personal family reflections form the bridge to link to the final activity (Part C), where caregivers explore "through the eyes of the child in care" the importance of family and what it is like for a child in this situation. Summary teaching points

are included at the end of the final activity to ensure that the relevant content and activities are integrated and reinforced.

A. The Importance Of The Child's Family

Instructions:

The following material includes key points that are organized under four themes relevant to the topic area. Although the content needs to be covered, foster parents can be flexible in how they review the material; the emphasis is on meeting the learning outcome.

Legislation/Legal Considerations

The Child, Family and Community Service Act and the Standards for Foster Homes identify the legislative imperative to maintain involvement of families when children are placed in-care whenever possible and in accordance with the child's Comprehensive Plan of Care. (See Overhead #3, "Child, Family and Community Service Act," and Handout #3, "Standards For Foster Homes.") There is a special legal importance when children are in temporary care.

The Child's Family

The child's family includes the child's parents or guardians at the time the child comes into care. It includes siblings, extended family members, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and the child's cultural community. In addition, it includes any other persons with whom the child has a significant relationship.

Family: The Child's Perspective

The child's family is extremely important to the child, regardless of how the child came to be in-care. Most children want to return home and will grieve the loss of their families if they cannot.

Most children have intense feelings about their families and love their parents, no matter what others may think about their parents' behaviour. Children identify with their families and suffer a loss of identity when separated.

Children may have a variety of fears and feelings about their families, such as worrying that their parents need them,

whether their families are all right, or whether their parents still love them. They may blame themselves for being in care, and may feel responsible for being removed from a neglectful or abusive family. They may see criticisms of family members as criticism of themselves.

B. The Importance of Family to Self

Instructions:

Foster families believe strongly in the value of family life. Many of these beliefs come from their own past and present experiences of family.

This exercise is an individual reflection on the family designed to encourage caregivers to think back on their own family life and reflect on why family has been important to them.

Please take a few moments to reflect privately on your own family experiences. Display Overhead #4, "The Importance of the Child's Family," and think about or jot down responses to the following questions.

What was it like for you growing up in your family? Think about and note experiences that were significant to you, positively and negatively. Recall times when you felt safe, nurtured, and secure and other times when you were upset or anxious about being separated from a close family member. Try to think of a specific time when you were separated from your family - for hospitalization or summer camp, for example - and the impact this experience had on you.

Handout #4, "The Importance of the Child's Family." Review the points in terms of their consistency with your own experiences of family:

- Connections with our families are our most profound relationships. Much of who we are in the world is learned very early from our families.
- Families are a source of identity, knowledge, comfort, and support.
- Family relationships are the principal way children learn to feel loved, worthwhile, capable, and responsible.
- Families are important in establishing our personal identity. This sense of identity and the images of parents become part of the child. The child identifies with the family and suffers a

loss of identity as well as a loss of relationships if permanently separated. Because they identify with their parents, children see any criticism of the parents as a criticism of themselves.

- How children and youth feel about themselves is related to their sense of family and belonging and to the respect and dignity they feel about their cultural heritage.
- Breaking of relationships with family through death, divorce, or removal is very traumatic to a child.
- There is great diversity in family patterns; each family has its own culture and way of doing things.
- Families have values that help them make decisions about what to do and say and how to see the rest of the world. Each family responds differently to problems and choices.
- Family plays an important role in the healthy growth and development of children and youth.
- Relationships with extended family and siblings provide a critical network of support as the child moves into adolescence and adulthood.

C. The Importance of Family to the Child in care

Instructions:

The previous individual reflective activity forms the bridge to link to this final activity. In this reflection, caregivers “open up” the importance of the family to the child in care and explore the importance of the family to the child and what it is like for a child in this situation.

Please use your responses to the previous activity as a basis to guide and inform you on the importance of family. Put yourself in the place of the child in care and then imagine the experience of a child in this situation.

Participants should focus on the child’s likely experience in being separated from family and why maintaining a relationship with the family is critical.

Be sure to remember the following points about the importance to the child of continuity and connections to his family.

- Most children return home (80% within 12 months) and a successful return home is more likely when the family has remained involved.
- Children need to see their families to be reassured that family members are alive and well. They need to feel their families have an interest in them and cares about them.
- The child who has lived with his parents may miss them deeply. No matter how troubled or difficult the parents may be, to the child the parents may represent his entire security. They are all the child has ever known. They are the roots to the past, the support, and the foundation of the child's life. When separated from them, the child feels that a part of self has been lost.
- Contact with the family after placement helps the child or youth deal with a variety of painful feelings, some of which may be exaggerated and illogical, and helps the child come to terms with who their parents are and why they are in-care. The child in care may never really understand why he has been separated from his family. No matter what the real explanation is, the child may develop explanations that can be quite exaggerated, irrational, fearful, or illogical.
- Continued contact with the child's parents allows the child to see her parents realistically. This continued contact not only benefits the child, but also helps the foster parents to see the child's family members as they really are.
- When contact is not maintained with the child's family, a child may experience various thoughts and feelings. Some children may develop fantasies about their families, making them horrible or wonderful; and they may feel the world is conspiring to keep them apart. Children may wonder what was wrong with them that their parents didn't want them. A child could also wonder where the parents and siblings are or may be fearful that something is wrong with them or that something has happened to them.

Summary Remarks:

This session was designed to reinforce the crucial role of the family to the child in care. The presentation and the two experiential activities were designed to help caregivers identify and appreciate the child's family as a source of comfort, identity, familiarity, and knowledge to the child in care. Caregivers also need to recognize that contact with the family may be painful for the child and that part of their role is supporting the child to resolve conflicting feelings and move forward.

3. THE CHILD'S FAMILY REACTIONS TO SEPARATION

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can describe emotions and behaviours that families may present as a result of the removal and placement of a child.

Materials:

Handouts

- Handout #5 Examples of Loss as Experienced by the Child's Family
- Handout #6 List of Possible Emotions, Behaviours, and Reasons

Overheads

- Overhead #5 Family Loss and Grief: Stages and Examples of Behaviours
- Overhead #6 Spokesperson's Instructions
- Overhead #7 Format For Recording Ideas

Instructions:

In this session, participants will be exploring the impact of the removal and placement of the child on the child's family. One of the tasks of the foster parent is to promote on-going connections and attachments between the child and his family members. In order to do this, it is important to first look at the possible impact of placement on the child's family.

A. Family Reactions To Removal of A Child

Instructions:

Briefly go over Overhead #5, "Family Loss and Grief: Stages and Examples of Behaviours," which provides participants with some context for subsequent material and exercises.

The child's family will likely go through the same grieving process that children do when they are taken from their homes. The thoughts and feelings of the child's family might influence family members' behaviours toward the foster parents. Some of the behaviours that the child's family displays toward the foster parents can be quite challenging.

Although loss and the stages of grieving are considered universal experiences, individuals are unique in the way in which they respond to loss; reactions depend on their own perceptions and the meaning which this loss has to them. Families move through the stages of grieving at different times and respond in many different ways. The relationship between foster families and the child's family can take many forms.

B. Loss as Experienced by the Child's Family

Instructions:

Please identify some of the losses you think families with children in care might experience and record them on your paper. Review Handout #5, "Examples of Loss as Experienced by the Child's Family."

- Loss of their children.
- Loss of control over day-to-day decisions.
- Loss of their roles as parents/family.
- Loss of self-esteem if they feel they have been inadequate or failed in meeting their parental responsibilities.
- Loss of income or other related benefits associated with having the child at home.
- Loss of the emotional support and comfort of their children in day-to-day living.
- Loss of respect in the eyes of the extended family or their communities.

C. Understanding Possible Family Emotions and Behaviours

Instructions:

Ponder the answers to the following questions:

- What emotions and behaviours of family members might result from the separation of a child from her family?
- What might be the reasons behind these emotions and

behaviours?

Refer to Overhead #7, "Format for Recording Ideas," take about 10 minutes to generate a list of feelings, behaviours, and possible reasons for these.

Review Handout #6, "List of Possible Emotions, Behaviours, and Reasons," after the exercise has been completed so that you first have an opportunity to develop your own list. Keep in mind that these are only possible feelings and behaviours and are not a substitute for listening carefully to family members.

You may wish to print out Handout #6, "List of Possible Emotions, Behaviours, and Reasons," and write your responses directly in the space provided.

Recall some of the communication strategies you learned in the "Communication Skills and Self-Awareness" Module (if they have taken it) and reflect on how you might respond to family members' apparent emotions. Remember the importance of active, empathic listening.

4. CAREGIVER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can identify and describe the roles of caregivers when working together with the child's family.

Materials:

Handouts

- Handout #7 Advantages of Involving The Child's Family
- Handout #8 Possible Caregiver Roles and Responsibilities with the Child's Family

Instructions:

This part of the session examines the caregiver's roles and responsibilities with the child's family. The caregiver's roles and responsibilities are determined by what is specified in the child's Comprehensive Plan of Care (Foster Home Standard C.2). In order to identify and describe the caregiver's roles and responsibilities when working with families, each child's Plan of Care, which is unique to the child's needs and circumstances, must be considered.

The primary role of foster parents is caregiving, assuming the day-to-day care of the child. Caregivers are also an important link in maintaining and supporting the relationship between the child and the child's family.

The caregiver's specific responsibilities related to the child's family will be determined by individual circumstances and laid out in the child's Comprehensive Plan of Care. It is critical that caregivers discuss with the child's worker which roles related to the family they are comfortable assuming, and that they accept responsibility for only those aspects of the Plan of Care they are capable of implementing.

Although specific roles and responsibilities in working with the child's family will vary, a general responsibility is to understand the importance of the child's connection to family and to cooperate with the Plan of Care in working with the family. One of the main ways to provide stability and continuity for the child in care is to involve the child's family in the sharing of information about the child, the activities in which the child is engaged, and some of the decisions that must be made in the child's day-to-day life. Possible roles and responsibilities for caregivers are further outlined in Handout #8, "Possible Caregiver Roles and Responsibilities with the Child's Family," to be reflected upon in the exercise following this presentation. The Plan of Care will outline the extent to which contact with family members, visits from family members, family involvement in decision-making, etc., is appropriate. The caregiver's general role and responsibility is to cooperate and communicate with the child's worker regarding implementation of the Plan of Care and to support both child and family to make relationships as positive as possible.

It is important for the caregiver to remember that the team approach used in guardianship means they are not alone. They have the understanding and support of other team members. For example, caregivers should feel comfortable asking for assistance from the child's worker when difficult situations or problems are encountered.

Exercise:

Handout #7, "Advantages of Involving The Child's Family." Any additional ideas you may have can be put directly onto Handout #7 in the space provided.

Advantages of Involving the Child's Family

- Maintains and supports the parent /child relationship.
- Improves the parents' self-esteem.
- Parents provide information about the child's development, routines and abilities, likes and dislikes, foods, activities, or any special problems.
- Allows foster parents to model appropriate behaviour.
- Helps the child in the transition to return back home.
- Lets the child's parents know that their role and relationship with the child is recognized and valued.
- Helps the child's parents to grow in understanding of the child's needs and appropriate expectations of the child.

- The foster family is able to develop a positive relationship with the child's family resulting in benefits for the child.
- The child can feel that his family and the foster family like each other.
- Provides a critical support network as the child moves toward adolescence and adulthood.

Handout #8, "Possible Caregiver Roles and Responsibilities with the Child's Family," please review the material.

Possible Caregiver Roles And Responsibilities With The Child's Family

- Fulfills their roles and responsibilities with the child's family members, as specified in the Child's Comprehensive Plan of Care.
- Encourages the child to have contact with his family unless access has been denied or restricted by the child's worker or court order.
- Provides reasonable opportunities for the child to receive visitors in the home, including family members.
- Promotes and supports the child's relationship with his primary family and extended family through regular contact and visitation.
- Works directly with members of the child's primary family to help strengthen and support them to provide care to the family.
- Assists in the reunification process of children in care with their primary families.
- Knows how visits may affect the feelings and behaviours of children and youth and helps plan and arrange visits that support the child and primary family.
- Knows the importance of strengthening and maintaining relationships between children in care and their families.
- Respects the child's family and cultural heritage and involves the child's family, consistent with the family's cultural background.
- Shares information concerning the child in accordance with the Plan of Care.

- Communicates with the child's family.

5. INVOLVING THE FAMILY

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can describe ways of involving the child's family during removal, placement, and, where applicable, the reunification process.

Materials:

Handout

- Handout #9 Ways To Involve The Child's Family

Overhead

- Overhead #8 Ways To Involve The Child's Family

Instructions:

Considering that the child's family may be experiencing the grieving process, foster parents will need to be pro-active, patient, and creative in promoting on-going contact between the child and his family. It will be important to find ways to keep the family involved during the child's time in-care, remembering that the more involvement, the more likely a successful return home. Both formal (e.g., in meetings, birthdays) and informal (e.g., in phone calls, invitations to watch the child's sporting event) inclusion of parents, siblings, or extended family is important.

Exercise:

Please reflect on situations in which you, as foster parents, could assist in involving the child's family during removal, placement, and the reunification process.

Overhead #8, "Ways to Involve the Child's Family," may give you some ideas and guidance.

Please consider three general headings when thinking of ways to involve the child's family:

1. involving the child's family in activities.
2. involving the child's family in information-sharing.
3. involving the child's family in decision-making.

Handout #9, "Ways to Involve the Child's Family," review the material.

Ways to Involve The Child's Family

The following are some suggestions on ways that have been helpful in involving the child's family. This list is not complete, but gives the caregiver a few ideas.

Involving the Child's Family in Activities

- Complete the child's lifebook.
- Give family photos of the child to the family.
- Ask the child's family to bring photographs to share with the child. Pictures from the child's past help bring back memories and highlight the positive moments spent with his family.
- Encourage the child to keep and display photos and other family mementos.
- Mention the child's family in your daily conversations with the child. For example, discuss visitation, when the child might return home, the current living situation of the parents, etc.
- Maintain phone contact; encourage family members to phone the child.
- Give parents verbal progress reports.
- Arrange family visits with parents.
- Invite the child's family into the home; encourage or arrange sibling visits.
- Meet child's family at placement.
- Include the child's family in routine tasks with the child such as shopping for clothing. Include family in day-to-day

appointments that are important to the child (e.g., dentist, doctor, school meetings, court appearances).

- Encourage family members to attend scheduled meetings, school programs, etc.
- Include parents in milestone events of their child, e.g., birthdays, growth spurts (buying new shoes).
- Attend parenting classes with parents.
- On special days (Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas) invite the child's parents to participate, plan activities, and shop for gifts or help the child to prepare a gift, card, etc.
- Transport the child's family to meetings.
- Learn about the family's culture.
- Attend special cultural events with the family.

Involving the Child's Family in Information-Sharing

- Be curious and respectful about the child and his family.
- Listen to the child talk about family.
- Acknowledge family with the child.
- Share caregivers' experience of their caring for the child with the family.
- Request information about development history (birth weight, age of walking, talking) and past behaviour unavailable elsewhere.
- Recognize the family's expertise in terms of child's developmental history, likes and dislikes, behavioural patterns, etc.
- Take care with the language used with the family (e.g., by not referring to "your child").
- Encourage the child to phone and send cards and letters to his family. Help the child to do so if necessary.
- Initiate phone contact.
- Exchange letter/emails with the family.
- Talk with parents during visits.
- Review child's visits with parent.
- On a regular basis, share information with the child's family regarding the child's daily activity, progress, and growth. It is preferable to discuss such information in the presence of the child.
- Request cultural information from the family.
- Share parenting information.
- Share the child's life book with the parents.
- Share copies of homework and report cards with the family.

Involving the Child's Family in Decision-Making

- Assist in planning the child's return home.

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- Consult with family about day-to-day decisions (e.g., what the child will eat, wear, have as toys, bedtime, chores, hobbies).
 - Consult with family about periodic decisions (e.g., if child should stay home from school, see a doctor, when the child needs help and what form it will take, religious education, how to wear her hair).
 - Consult with the child's family regarding significant decisions that affect the family and the life of their child.

6. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES (35 minutes)

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can identify and describe skills when working with the child's family.

Material:

Handout

- Handout #10 Case Scenarios

Overhead

- Overhead #9 Questions for Case Scenarios

Other

- paper
- pen

Instructions:

This session provides an opportunity for caregivers to consolidate what they have learned in this module. The activity is based on several case scenarios that portray realistic, challenging situations that caregivers may encounter when working with families. The caregiver is asked to think through and problem solve these situations considering the perspectives of the child's family, the child, and the foster parent. The goal is to identify what skills and approaches to use in handling situations in a way that "builds bridges" and promotes positive relationships.

Exercise:

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Distribute Handout #10, "Case Scenarios."

Display Overhead #9, "Questions for Case Scenarios."

1. Consider the parents' perspective. What might be happening for them?
2. Consider the child's perspective. What might be happening for the child as displayed by his behaviour?
3. Think about the foster parent. What might he be feeling?
4. What would an effective foster parent response to the child and to the family be in this situation?

You are encouraged to draw on your own experiences and successes in reviewing the scenarios.

In summary remember the following points.

- Whether your relationship with particular families is positive or difficult, it is important for you to be sensitive to the child's and family's changing emotional states and to their feelings toward family relationships.
- It is important to build a positive relationship with the child's family using the skills you have identified such as understanding, empathy, and discussion.
- Acknowledging and building on the child's family's strengths is integral in developing a cooperative relationship that benefits the child and recognizes and supports the child's attachment to family members.

