

NEWS FROM YOUR PEER LIAISON



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I UNDERSTAND...

I AM A FOSTER PARENT TOO

IFAPA recognizes that foster parents often need the perspective of peers during the foster parenting and adoption experience.

I can provide support and assist you with questions regarding:

- Licensing requirements
- Training needs
- Respite care
- Behavior challenges
- Working with birth families
- Confidentiality issues



www.ifapa.org

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH BIOLOGICAL PARENTS

Foster parenting comes with many challenges and rewards. One of the more difficult challenges foster parents face is working with biological parents. Some bio parents are easier to work with than others, but learning skills to balance the relationship with bio parents is incredibly beneficial to the parents, the children involved and for yourself and your own family.

We learn while training to become a foster parent the stages of grief and loss that children experience from being removed. What we don't always stop to consider is that biological parents of these children also go through stages of grief and loss. Understanding these stages will help you work with bio parents.

STAGE 1: SHOCK

Parents are in disbelief. The words people are saying don't sink in or make sense and they are unable to really comprehend all that is being said. The only thing on their mind is that their child is gone. Birth families may go back and forth between shock and sadness and anger and irrationality. Behaviors include: shaking, screaming, crying, or swearing. They are overwhelmed with worries about their child. They are overwhelmed and feel helpless and without control. Parents may promise the social worker anything without understanding what they promised. They will often beg for a second chance. Parents may be in denial and are sure the child will return tomorrow.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH BIO PARENTS DURING STAGE 1:

Start the conversation. Do not say "I understand how you are feeling." This could anger birth parents who feel no one can understand how they are feeling. A better approach would be to introduce yourself by saying, "Karen, I am Donna. I am taking care of your child until he can come home to you. He is missing you. I felt you wanted to know who was taking care of your son."

Be ready for serious anger. Do not let angry words stop your compassion. The birth parents have lost control over their child. They are at a loss as to how to fight for themselves. Demonstrating that you understand this frustration is a first step in the development of trust between the adults.

STAGE 2: PROTEST

Grief can be experienced more physically. They may struggle with insomnia and other physical complaints such as stomach aches, muscle aches, headaches and exhaustion. Birth families may be more highly emotional and continue to experience fluctuating emotions from sadness to anger. They may be angry at everyone and out of anger they may refuse to participate in services.

NEWS FROM YOUR IFAPA PEER LIAISON

The parents may make demands or threats and may find it easier to blame others for the situation than to accept their responsibility. All of these behavioral responses to grief are attempts to cope with despair, depression, fear, hopelessness and helplessness.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH BIO PARENTS DURING STAGE 2:

Assure birth parents you will not harm their children. Birth parents benefit from hearing these words from the foster parents. They may have heard or read scary stories about foster parents.

Be humble. Let the birth parent be the knowledgeable one when talking about their child. Example: "You know your child better than anyone. How do you want me to care for your child while he is here?"

Understand the birth parent's anger as an expression of grief. Do not show your own anger. Instead, show compassion. This can be difficult if the children have been neglected or abused. Your feelings are your own and should not be overlooked. But as foster parents, you must remember the child loves his or her parents. The plan is almost always reunification. Use your own feelings to motivate and support the birth parents as they learn how to parent their children in healthy ways.

Use Reflective Listening. Birth parents need to be heard, not judged. Reflective listening is the practice of repeating or paraphrasing what the person you are talking to has just said, reflecting back the emotions you are hearing. Example: "I hate that my children are staying with strangers!" Reflective response: "You sound worried that people you don't know will not know how to care for your children."

Don't sell yourself as wonderful, superior, or the child's salvation. Birth parents may feel embarrassed or threatened by the foster family's home. Birth parents may believe foster parents are in it for the money. Birth parents need to hear from foster parents that they are here to help families reunite. Birth parents need to hear again and again that their children need them and that material things aren't important.

STAGE 3: ADJUSTMENT

Things begin to settle down and emotions are more stable but at times may feel depressed or upset as they accept the reality that their behaviors resulted in the removal of their children. At this phase birth families have generally come to terms with the judge's ruling and are usually more cooperative with the case plan. They have increased ability to really comprehend the circumstances that led to the removal and conditions for their child to be able to return home. Adjustment occurs sooner if the parents have an ally, such as the social worker, foster family and/or other members of the 'team'. Birth families are able to adjust sooner if they are able to develop a trusting relationship with the birth family, this is significant to lessening the birth family's worries about the safety or loyalty of their child. This helps to bring the focus and attention to the child.

Fun Activity for your Kids to Do!



Make Your Own Play Snow!

1/2 Cup Suave Conditioner
and
3 Cups Baking Soda

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Here's a good sensory activity for the holiday season (from Huckleberry Love) with only 2 ingredients that you probably already have in the house!





# NEWS FROM YOUR IFAPA PEER LIAISON

## TIPS FOR WORKING WITH BIO PARENTS DURING STAGE 3:

**Ask birth parents what questions they have for you.** Birth parents may want to know: Do the children have a room by themselves? Who bathes them? What do you tell them about why they are in foster care? How do you let them know we love them? When can I talk to them? Are you going to change them so that they are more like your family? Do you want to keep our kids?

**Ask birth parents about their children.** Ask questions such as: How do you want us to take care of them? What do your children like to eat? What allergies do they have? Are they allergic to any medications, mold, animals, etc.? What fears do they have? What do you do to calm them? What do they need with them at bedtime, such as special blankets, pillows, stuffed animals?

**Develop an action plan for parenting the children together.** When questions are answered you can, in collaboration with the children's social worker, develop an action plan that might include phone calls, family-oriented visits at the agency, at parks, and in time, at the foster home. Birth parents can join their children and the foster parents at medical appointments, school activities and meetings, church functions, community activities, birthdays, holidays, and summer activities.

When the birth parents are attending these functions, foster parents should introduce them as the children's parents and ask doctors and school personnel to discuss their children's needs with the birth parents. This helps the birth parents practice parenting and allows foster parents to play a supportive role.

*Adapted from Charles Horejsi's "Working with Biological Parents"*



## UPCOMING TRAININGS

| Date & Time                    | Name of Training                                                          | Credit  | Location                                                       |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Jan. 17, 2015<br>9am-4:30pm    | <a href="#">Stick to It: Maintaining a Challenging Placement</a>          | 6 hours | <b>Council Bluffs</b><br>Holiday Inn Express<br>2211 S 32nd St |
| Jan. 17, 2015<br>9am-12:15pm   | <a href="#">When Old Parenting Strategies Don't Work! Help Me Please!</a> | 3 hours | <b>Sioux City</b><br>Stoney Creek Inn<br>300 3rd St            |
| Jan. 17, 2015<br>1:30pm-4:45pm | <a href="#">Bullying - What's a Parent to Do?</a>                         | 3 hours | <b>Sioux City</b><br>Stoney Creek Inn<br>300 3rd St            |

## IFAPA's Spring Conference

Friday & Saturday,  
March 6 & 7, 2015

Adventureland Inn - Altoona  
(3200 Adventureland Drive /  
Off I-80 - Exit 142A)  
515-265-7321

Each day of the conference is worth six hours of foster parent training credit. Many classes are also approved for Social Worker CEUs and are noted throughout the brochure.

## Conference Registration

Participants have the option to register via mail or online.

### REGISTER BY MAIL:

To register for this conference, please complete the register form at [www.ifapa.org](http://www.ifapa.org) and mail to IFAPA with a check or money order. Phone registrations will not be accepted.

### REGISTER ONLINE:

To register and pay online, visit [www.ifapa.org](http://www.ifapa.org).

### REGISTRATION DEADLINE:

The registration deadline is Tuesday, February 17th.

All registrations must be postmarked or dropped off at the office (office hours are 8am-4:30pm) by Tuesday, February 17, 2015. A confirmation letter will be emailed to all registered participants the week of March 2, 2015.

Cancellation Refund Deadline is Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2015 - No Exceptions.