

Heart to Heart: Caregiver & Child Connections in Times of Challenge

Frequently Asked Questions

Can you tell us what happens when a caregiver doesn't believe a child or thinks they're making things up? It can be difficult at times to discern whether or not a child is being honest. Even when children misrepresent the truth, they need to be held with love - not rejection.

Do you have tips for maintaining connections over distance? Record video chats to replay for children between visits, have parents pre-record bedtime stories, help the child hold their parent in their mind "do you think we should take a picture in your cool shirt and send it to daddy?"

Why do children become dysregulated after visits w/ birth family? We have connected them to an attachment source and then taken it away which is especially difficult for young children to understand. Caregivers should talk to the child about these feelings before the visit. Let them know its okay to have big feelings and that you'll be there to help them make sense of what's happening.

Any ideas for specific things to help undue trauma? Help children create strategies for big feelings (throw a soft ball against the wall, scribble on paper, scream into a pillow, run or other forms of physical exercise). Use activities that feel good and connect to sensory needs/comfort in anticipation of dysregulation as well as for helping children regulate after the fact.

How can caregivers handle seeing children dysregulated every time they are forced to see a parent they have not bonded with? Co-regulation is critical; if adults don't help stressed children calm down they, won't learn the skill. If possible, be present for the visit to help put the child at ease and reassure them in advance of and after visits that you will continue to be there.

Would you encourage foster parents to maintain relationships with children even after they have moved on to either another home or been reunified? Children can never have too many people who love them in their lives so continued contact post transition or reunification is a wonderful gift.

What are some good ways to help encourage and connect birth parents with sheltered (out-of-home) infants/young children when the crucial developmental time of bonding has been interrupted? The good news is that it is never too late for children to build relationships and attachments. The first and best intervention is to show up and be present/consistent/available.

How do we help school age children who have experienced trauma learn to self-regulate, particularly in a school setting? Patterned, repetitive, sensory experiences are good for calming/regulation. Meditation is very helpful even for young children.

My foster child is only 3 months old, what are some everyday things I can do with her? Hold the baby and soothe her when she is upset. Talk to her, sing songs, play peek a boo, read aloud, and play music for her.

Are there some specific practices to help "undo" previous traumatic experiences that have "damaged" a child's understanding of relationship? All caregiving relationships need to first protect from harm. Make sure children are safe. When children are safe in relationship they can thrive, take risks and create emotional relationships. Children need to know they're in someone's mind's eye, someone is thinking of them, holding them in their heart, and wishing them well.

Where do you start with a family when both parents do not have coregulation? You may want to start by helping the parents understand and learn self-regulation skills. You can explain why self-regulation is important and how critical coregulation is for their child's development.

What are some good ways for young kids to process and deal with anger? Let them know that their emotions are never unacceptable, they have a right to their emotions, their emotions matter and they matter. Model for children how to manage big feelings and demonstrate empathy.

What are some effective ways for a caseworker to work with a parent who seems to be angry at the world and passing blame for not doing her part? It is important to remain non-judgmental and empathetic. Remember, it's normal for parents to be angry and/or in denial about the circumstances that lead to the removal of their child.

How do you address resource parents who are becoming very attached to a child who is going to be placed with a relative soon? While transitions can be difficult, caregiver attachment should not be discouraged, even when you know a child will not be staying forever. Every child needs secure attachment relationships to thrive and ideally, children will attach to multiple caregivers.

What are some things you can do to reassure an attention-seeking child? If you only notice children when they misbehave, they will increase these behaviors because they want to be noticed. It is important to let children know they are loved and seen. Children need to know, "I matter and am a person of value because someone took the time to notice (look, listen, learn from) me." Respond to their needs, walk with them, tell them you care. It may take multiple messages but that's okay, just keep showing up for the child.