

Video stories, other bonding exercises could help foster families connect

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Teenagers and their foster families often say they don't feel connected and have trouble communicating, but few resources exist that nurture their bonding. In a research paper being published in the June issue of *Children and Youth Services Review*, researchers affiliated with the University of Washington's School of Social Work describe how they tailored a parenting program known to improve communication in non-foster families for use in foster families.

"Every family has its own unique dynamics, such as different rules or expectations. When teens are placed into a foster home, they may experience this as a kind of cultural divide and many need help building a connection to their new [caregivers](#)," said Susan Barkan, lead author and associate research director for Partners for Our Children, which is a joint endeavor between UW, Washington state and private funders to take a research-based approach to improve [child welfare](#) practice and policy.

The program that Barkan and her colleagues developed is intended to guide foster families through exercises that will bring them closer together.

Many children enter the child welfare system due to neglect, Barkan said. Their biological parents may be consumed by [substance abuse](#), [mental health issues](#), tenuous housing situations and other challenges.

"Such a chaotic environment makes it hard for anyone to grow and

thrive in. But taking kids out of their home – even if it is to protect them – can also be a traumatic experience," Barkan said.

Foster parents have the potential to help children in the child welfare system process the trauma they've been through and to make them less vulnerable to [risky behaviors](#), including substance abuse and violence, she said.

Much of the program – called "Connecting" – delves into helping caregivers see where their foster teen is coming from. Each of the 10 chapters has materials and suggested activities intended to help families bond, such as:

- Short videos of former foster youth describing their experiences in child welfare,
- Creating "brag boards" to share basic information like favorite color and what they're proud of,
- Teens telling their caregivers about the people who matter most in their lives.

The self-administered program takes about 10-12 weeks to complete and is adapted from the UW-created program "Staying Connected with Your Teen," which has been shown to improve communication within non-foster families and has been linked to lower adolescent use of alcohol and other drugs, violence and other risky behaviors.

When Barkan and her co-authors tested "Connecting" on a group of nine foster teens and their caregivers, they learned that watching the videos was a particularly helpful exercise. One family called it "a crack-open moment where they could talk about things they couldn't in the year they had been together," Barkan recalled.

For instance, in one video, a young man named Josh talks about how his

mom gave him away when he was 6 and how he acted out because he missed her so much. In another video, Jessica describes how she had been her "own boss" and had trouble adjusting to her [foster parents'](#) rules.

"The videos help illustrate the unique challenges foster youth have when going into a care situation, such as new family dynamics and clashes," Barkan said. After watching the videos, foster families talk about how the scenario is similar or different, so the caregiver knows where teens are coming from.

The researchers are now testing the program with more youth and caregivers, and hope to make it available to the public in a couple of years.

More information: Paper: www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0190740914000991

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