



## STRENGTH-BASED WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

# FROM VISITATION TO FAMILY TIME

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This series focuses on words and expressions that are considered strength-based, with the aim of ensuring that resource families and agency staff talk and write humanely and positively about children and birth families who need family foster care services. Examples include replacing:

- “cases” with “children, young people, or families,” because cases don’t have feelings and behaviors;
- “homes” with “families,” because it is not the homes that protect and nurture children, only families can do that;
- “removal” with “separation,” because objects (garbage and snow) are removed but children and parents are separated;
- “placed in a foster home” with “joined a foster family,” because, again, children are not objects that can be removed from one location and set down in another but, instead, they need to be joined or connected with a foster family who can gently help them make the transition;
- “child prostitute” with “young person who was impacted by sexual exploitation.”

This article suggest another reframe: replacing “visitation” with “family time.”

It was 62 years ago when two foster care researchers, Maas and Engler, published the first comprehensive

national study of children in foster care. Titled “Children in Need of Parents,” their work documented what today is understood as just logical: contact between children in foster care and their parents is the single best predictor of reunification. It would be 15 years later when another national study by researchers Fanshel and Shinn documented that children who had regular contact with their parents — known then as “natural parents” — fared better in terms of emotional well-being and developmental progress.

While over time we replaced the words “natural parents” with “parents,” “birth parents” or “bio-parents,” it has taken much longer to consistently evidence another national finding. In the 1980s, it was documented that parent-child contact should not occur on the whim of parents, case-workers or foster parents but as an essential part of the service plan. Over the years, states developed guidelines to create and support contact between children and their parents.

Agency staff need training to, in turn, train and support birth parents and foster parents so everyone knows how to have a safe space and time for children and parents to connect with each other. This is essential due to the initial emotional trauma of separation and the indefinite period of time that

children are living with their foster families.

To help minimize trauma for children and parents and maximize teamwork among everyone involved in family time, it can be helpful to have guidelines or work tools. Here are two Work Tools created for Child Welfare League of America’s PRIDE Model of Practice to develop and support foster and adoptive (resource) parents as team members in child protection and trauma informed care of children. The first worksheet is “Benefits of Planned and Support Family Time.” It also includes examples of risks when family time is not planned and supported.

Valuable family time requires more than the knowledge and understanding that comes from a list. It also is essential to have steps that make the experience valuable and meaningful. Here is a work tool that explains five steps to help achieve these outcomes.

**Step 1: CLARIFY** who has the right and needs to be participating in family time.

**Step 2: PREPARE** each family time participant for a meaningful experience. Work with the parents, children, and foster parents — and other children in the foster family — for what may happen during Family Time. There should not be any surprises.

**Step 3: SUPPORT** the children and parents for an enjoyable family time experience. Despite the preparation, parents can be anxious. Children may be confused or excited depending on their age and state of development. Sometimes adolescents don't want to see their parents. Sometimes it may be more helpful to have a shorter family time experience that goes well in comparison to a longer time in which communication — especially if virtual — is awkward or frustrating. Be certain there are back up plans; the aim is to make the experience as positive as possible for everyone.

**Step 4: PROCESS or DEBRIEF** the Family Time experience. Everyone needs to have the opportunity to express their feelings. What is the process for these conversations to happen? Who creates the opportunities for the adults — parents, foster parents and agency staff — to talk together? Who creates the opportunities for the children to share their feelings instead of acting them out?

**Return to Step 2: PREPARE AGAIN.** Based on what was learned in Step 4, return to Step 2 and prepare again. Build on the strengths — what went well? Address the challenges whether logistical, situational and/or emotional. Again, agency staff must have the casework and clinical skills to ensure the most positive Family Time possible commensurate with the objectives of the service plan, which initially is reunification. Be certain not to take the emotions and behaviors of the children out of context and equate them with family time being a bad experience. This step is essential. Too often, there is where family time is reduced or stopped because foster parents and agency staff do not understand that children's feelings and behaviors

## Benefits of Plans and Supported Family Time

1. For children, planned and supported family time can:
  - Show that the family member cares
  - Help build/rebuild connections
  - Help the child see the parent more realistically
  - Give the child hope for reunification
  - Provide continuity in relationships
  - Prepare the child for the contact, the time together and the feelings after
2. For the parent, planned and supported family time can:
  - Demonstrate caring
  - Help build/rebuild connections
  - Help parent view the child more realistically
  - Help the parent learn the developmental needs of the child
  - Prepare the parent for the contact and “debrief” after
  - Give the parent an opportunity to practice/demonstrate parenting skills
  - Give the parent hope for reunification
  - Help the parent view their own strengths and limitations in parenting
3. For the foster or resource parent, planned and supported family time can:
  - Show the child/youth and parent that the resource parent supports the contact
  - Reinforce that the resource parent is not trying to “steal” the child's affections
  - Give insight into the child's behaviors as they relate to feelings about the parent
  - Provide an opportunity to model parenting skills related to developmental needs
  - Help view the process toward reunification more realistically
4. For agency staff, planned and supported family time can:
  - Show the child and parent that the agency staff support the contact
  - Reinforce the goal toward reunification
  - Demonstrate teamwork between the resource parent and the agency staff in supporting child-parent contact
  - Give insight into the child's behaviors and the parent's behaviors as they relate to feelings about each other
  - Help view progress toward reunification more realistically
  - Provide documentation for the case record and court reports/hearings
5. Lack of planned and supported family time typically:
  - Gives the parent a “mixed message” about responsibility
  - Teaches the child that all the adults are unpredictable
  - Provides no preparation for the child/youth or parent for the contact
  - Sets up unrealistic expectations for reunification and after
  - Enables the child and parent to fantasize about or deny the relationship
  - Enables the child to get “settled” and then “unsettled” by the contact
  - Reinforces that agency staff and resource parents are aggravated by the parent
  - Is determined by agency staff and resource parent convenience
  - Mitigates against the development of a therapeutic alliance

are a natural part of the family time experience.

In summary, it has been said that family time is like riding a two-wheel bicycle. It is not typical to hop on and ride successfully. In the process of learning, initially there may have been someone behind us holding onto the bike to help us stay balanced and safe. Before that, we may have had training wheels. Prior to that, we had tricycles. But first we have to be able to reach the foot pedals, hold on to the handlebars, and balance.

When family time is not successful, it typically is parallel to putting someone on a two-wheeler and expecting them to ride without the learning steps that occurred beforehand. Start with small steps: a phone call or a text. When those go well, get to the planning meetings. When those go well,

arrange the in person or virtual family time. If it doesn't go well, maybe the experience needs to be "walked back" to a simpler step — akin to training wheels or a tricycle. Set family time up for success! Investing in these child and family-friendly steps is definitely not "visits." •

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## One Simple Wish: A Foster Child's Wish Come True

**Cameron** spent five years in foster care and had an incredibly difficult time. He was treated very poorly and often felt like he was never really cared for. After exiting foster care, he spent a few years being homeless. Finally, he was able to get on disability and get into the University of Nevada where he has finally been able to focus on a better future. Unfortunately, after his first semester, he realized that not all of his student loans were applied to his balance, and what he thought was excess funds from his Pell grant ended up being used for housing and other fees. He has managed to work his balance down more than half. However, in order for him to enroll and continue his education, he needs to pay off the remainder of the balance. School has literally saved Cameron's life and he came to us hoping we could help him pay off the balance so he can continue on this positive path toward the life he has worked so hard to build.

One Simple Wish enables everyone to make a difference in the lives of foster children and at-risk youth by allowing them to grant their wishes through One Simple Wish's website at [www.onesimplewish.org](http://www.onesimplewish.org). If you are interested in granting a wish or have a foster child who would like to submit a wish, write to [info@onesimplewish.org](mailto:info@onesimplewish.org).

