The Connections Project: A Relational Approach to Engaging Birth Parents in Visitation

Charyl E. Gerring, Susan P. Kemp, and Maureen O. Marcenko

This paper presents a practical framework for relational practice with birth families, organized around parental visitation. The approach was developed in the Birth Family–Foster Family Connections Project, a three-year collaborative research demonstration project between a large private agency and the Washington State Department of Child and Family Services. The overall goal of the Connections Project, which served young children from infancy to age 6, was to create supportive connections among birth families, foster families, children, and the child welfare system. Although engaging parents in child welfare services is a challenging task for social workers, the Connections Project resulted in strong parent-worker relationships, very high participation in weekly visitation by birth parents, and quite extensive contact between birth and foster families. The paper describes relational strategies used by Connections social workers before and during visits, with the goal of providing child welfare social workers with a practical and effective framework for engaging parents through this core child welfare service.

Charyl E. Gerring MA, MSW, ACSW, LICSW is Affiliate Assistant Professor, University of Washington School of Social Work, New York, New York. Susan P. Kemp PhD is Associate Professor, University of Washington School of Social Work, Seattle, Washington. Maureen O. Marcenko PhD is Associate Professor, University of Washington School of Social Work, Seattle, Washington.

0009–4021/2008/060805-30 $3.00 Child Welfare League of America

One of the most complex tasks in child welfare practice is working with parents whose children have been placed in foster care. By definition, families with children in placement are in acute distress, struggling not only with the issues that precipitated the loss of their child or children, but also with the trauma of the loss itself. Feelings of fear, shame, guilt, and anger are inevitably present in parents' relationships with child welfare social workers. In turn, workers face the difficult challenge of building supportive relationships with parents while holding them accountable for the issues that precipitated the removal of their child. Since profound tensions mark each side of the interaction, it is not surprising that work with birth parents is often accorded low priority by overburdened workers (Smith & Donovan, 2003).

Nevertheless, the ability to engage and assist parents struggling with a complex array of issues lies at the heart of effective practice with child welfare–involved families (Dawson & Berry, 2002; Dore & Alexander, 1996). Asked about their training needs, child welfare caseworkers identified skills in intervening with very conflicted, involuntary clients as a high priority (Pecora, 1989). To help such parents engage in services, workers need an appreciation of the damaging impact of multiple family stressors on anyone trying to parent, a good working knowledge of parents' defensive patterns and developmental needs, and a sound understanding of relational processes (Halpern, 1997).

For many child welfare social workers, gaining these skills is difficult. Training curricula and best practice models target parental behaviors that place children at risk, such as substance abuse and inadequate parenting skills. Less attention is focused on preparing workers in the relational and therapeutic skills that give power to development and growth. Furthermore, parent-focused services such as visitation, parenting interventions, mental health

Address reprint requests to Charyl E. Gerring, Affiliate Assistant Professor, University of Washington, School of Social Work, 272 W 107th Street #3C, New York, NY 10025. Phone: 212-749-2490. E-mail: cgerring@u.washington.edu.

and substance abuse treatment, and supportive services are often contracted to other agencies, leaving child welfare workers with limited opportunities for sustained work with birth families, and increasing the likelihood that parents will experience child welfare services as fragmented and unwelcoming.

Responding to these issues, this paper presents a practical framework for relational practice with birth families, organized around parental visitation, a cornerstone of child welfare practice. The approach was developed in the Birth Family-Foster Family Connections Project (also called the Connections Project), a three-year collaborative research demonstration between a large private agency and the Washington State Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) established in 2001 with funding from the Stuart Foundation. The overall goal of the project, which served young children from infancy to age six, was to create strong, supportive connections among birth families, foster families, children, and the child welfare system.

This paper focuses on providing more specific information on the Connections Project's relational approach in the hope that information on these details of everyday practice will be helpful to child welfare social workers. The sections that follow describe the project, including its theoretical and empirical foundations, and present findings from the project's research evaluation regarding parents' participation in visitation and perspectives on program services (more detailed findings are reported in Marcenko, Kemp, & Brennan, 2004). The body of the paper describes key aspects of the project's approach to visitation practice, drawing on notes taken during or directly after visits by the project's workers. The paper concludes with implications for child welfare social work practice.

Acknowledgments: *The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Stuart Foundation, which funded the Connections Project; the Washington State Department of Child and Family Services; the project's dedicated staff; and William Vesneski MSW, for his invaluable research assistance. The authors alone are responsible for the views expressed in this paper.*

The Connections Project

Using visitation as the centerpiece of its work, the Connections Project sought to engage and enhance birth family participation in case planning and services; to repair, maintain, and build parent-child relationships; and to support a range of connections between birth and foster parents. The primary assumption guiding the Connections Project model was that children and families benefit in the short- and long-term from efforts to nurture and sustain connections among children, birth families, and foster families that will endure regardless of where a child is placed (Gerring, 1996, 1997). Corollary values were that (a) the birth family has much of value to offer their child, (b) maintaining parent-child connections is the right and compassionate thing to do based on common human decency, and (c) connecting birth and foster families is an immensely practical way to provide both a continuum of care for the child and a strong foundation for adolescence and adulthood.

Project services included preparatory work with birth and foster families, assistance with arranging visits and transporting children and families, professional supervision of weekly visits (including support and coaching), follow-up contacts with birth and foster families, and the provision of other supportive services as needed to facilitate regular, frequent, and meaningful connections. Project services were provided as a corollary to an extension of ongoing DCFS services through the development of a Connections Project agreed to by all parties. Responsibility for overall case planning and supervision remained with the DCFS caseworker. The Connections Project team worked closely with DCFS; a foster parent panel and a clinical psychologist also provided consultation. The Connections Project differed from usual DCFS services in its intentional focus on supporting connections and, given their low caseloads, in the amount of time workers were able to spend in contact with parents, their children, and foster parents. A hallmark of the project was its very low worker turnover and thus high level of worker continuity in providing services.

Theoretical and Empirical Foundations

At the program level, theoretical frameworks "help frontline providers make sense of what they are observing and learning about families and decide how and where to intervene" (Halpern, 1997, p. 266). The Connections Project was informed by psychoanalytically oriented understandings of the attachment and relational needs of human beings (Bowlby, 1982; Karen, 1994) and by the application of these ideas in supportive services to families (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994) and infant mental health interventions (Gowen & Nebrig, 1997; Kelly & Barnard, 2000). From child welfare, the project drew on family-centered, inclusive, and strengths-based practice models (Kemp, Allen-Eckard, Ackroyd, Becker, & Burke, 2005; Leathers, 2002; Palmer, Maieter, & Manji, 2006). Bringing these strands together, the Connections Project model emphasized relationship building, multidimensional supports, and the development of connections and common ground among disparate individuals who share a concern for a child (Gerring, 1996; Maluccio, Fein, & Davis, 1994; Minuchin, Colapinto, & Minuchin, 1998).

Recent research shows that child welfare interventions lead to more positive outcomes for families when sensitive attention is given to the needs of both parents and children (Dawson & Berry, 2002; Lee & Ayón, 2004). A strong worker-parent relationship, characterized by mutual respect, effective communication, and emotional support is particularly important (Drake, 1994; Jivanjee, 1999). When parents trust their social workers, parental self-esteem and service completion increases (Hinden, Biebel, Nicholson, & Mehnert, 2005). Furthermore, respect and trust facilitate candid communication and allow parents to express their grief and anger over their child's removal without fear of blame or judgment (deBoer & Coady, 2007; Palmer et al., 2006).

Also important are efforts to respond to parents' needs for information, skills, and concrete help. McKay, Stoewe, McCadam, and Gonzales (1998) found that telephone and in-person contacts between social workers and parents enhanced take-up and retention

in children's mental health services by low-income urban families. Key elements in these contacts included (a) clarifying the helping process, (b) establishing a collaborative parent-social worker, (c) addressing parents' immediate, practical concerns, and (d) identifying and then working to remove barriers to services.

In child welfare, visitation provides a strategic, non-threatening opportunity for engaging birth parents, supporting their efforts to change, and building relationships that nourish parents and children in the longer term (Hess, 2005). Visitation seems to be particularly effective when it reflects inclusive practice principles (Leathers, 2002; Palmer, 1995; Palmer et al., 1996): hallmarks of "positively-oriented visiting," as Milner (1987) has termed it, include visits that take place in "homelike settings" (Haight, Black, Mangelsdorf, Giorgio, Tata, Schoppe, & Szewczyk, 2002, p. 201), casework services that prepare parents and children for visiting (Haight et al., 2002; see also, Hess, 2005), visits that are tailored to child and family needs (Hess, 2005), and supportive involvement by foster parents (Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000).

Collaborative relationships between birth and foster families are increasingly seen as a positive benefit to parents and children (Burton & Showell, 1997; Linares, Montalto, Li, & Oza, 2006; Pasztor, McNitt, & McFadden, 2005). Minuchin et al. (1998) advocated a cooperative model, based in an ecological, family systems perspective, in which foster and birth parents form a "constructive, problem-solving network around the child through the period of placement" (p. 255). Research findings indicate that parents are more likely to participate in visitation when foster parents are supportive of contact between birth parents and children (Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000). Foster parents' positive views toward birth parents have also been linked to higher levels of birth parent involvement in children's care and school activities (Poirier & Simard, 2006).

These various theoretical and empirical strands came together to shape and inform the Connections Project's approach

to working with birth families. Specifically, the project was committed to

- building supportive, respectful connections with birth parents that encompassed their needs and strengthened their capacity to provide nurturing, safe care of their child;
- bringing healing to the trauma of separation through visitation;
- using workers' knowledge, relational skills, and creative energies to encourage birth and foster families toward safe, comfortable, face-to-face connections, recognizing the value of shared nurturing to the child who is dependent on both families;
- encouraging and supporting parents' participation in visitation and other mandated services, but at the same time gently following families' preferences and priorities, including (with DCFS approval) those regarding the form and timing of visits; and
- making special efforts to involve fathers and extended family, again with DCFS approval.

The Connections Project Evaluation: Sample, Methods, and Selected Findings

The Connections Project served 34 birth families with 57 children drawn from 4 DCFS offices in Washington State. Of the enrolled families, 30 birth mothers, 11 birthfathers, and 31 foster mothers participated in the evaluation. Participating birth parents were primarily Caucasian (73%). Children currently in foster care from participating DCFS offices were eligible for inclusion in the project if they were ages birth to 6 years at the time of referral and were not Native American and tribally enrolled.[1] No other screening criteria were applied.

[1] In Washington State, tribally enrolled Native American children typically are served either by designated Native American child welfare units or by tribal child welfare services.

Evaluation methods included interviews with birth and foster parents, focus groups with agency staff, developmental assessments of participating children, and tracking of visitation data and key permanency outcomes. Reported here are data on birth parent participation in visitation (as recorded by project staff), and parents' perceptions of services. Semi-structured interviews with birth parents were conducted by a trained interviewer on entry to the program and again at 6- and 12-month intervals. The baseline interviews included basic demographic information, standardized measures of parenting attitudes and knowledge, and qualitative data regarding parent hopes and concerns, use of services, and perceptions of social support. Follow-up interviews covered these same domains along with questions regarding program efficacy and satisfaction.

Of the birth parents, 29 participated in 6-month follow-up interviews, and 17 participated in 12-month follow-up interviews. In part, the lower number of birth families who participated in the 6- and 12-month follow-up interviews reflected patterns of enrollment (families recruited later in the project did not participate long enough for interviews to be conducted at all data points). However, some birth parents were also unable to be contacted (e.g., they were no longer in the area or in contact with the project), raising the possibility that these parents were potentially less connected to or satisfied with the Connections Project. Their lack of participation in the follow-up interviews may have resulted in a positive skew in some of the qualitative data.

The evaluation was undertaken with Institutional Review Board approval: full consent procedures were followed. All evaluation and project materials presented in the paper have been adapted to protect the identities of participants.

Participation in Visitation

The Connections Project resulted in very high participation in weekly visitation by birth parents. All 34 birth families who participated had at least one parent who participated in 60% or more of their visits. Breaking this down further, 25% of the parents partici-

pated in between 60% and 85% of their visits, 25% participated in 90 to 95%, and 50% participated in 99 to 100% of their visits. Both birth and foster parents also reported quite extensive contact before and after the visits, including telephone calls, social activities, and shared visits to medical appointments and other services.

Parent Perspectives on Program Services

Asked in initial interviews what they hoped to gain from the project, birth parents focused on the opportunity to maintain and strengthen their relationships with their children. Related to this, they were eager to improve their parenting skills and, ultimately, to have their children returned home. Asked in follow-up interviews to comment on the ways in which the project had been helpful to them or their children, parents were particularly appreciative of regular contact with their children, their supportive, respectful, and inclusive relationship with the Connections Project social workers, and access to and connection with their child's foster parents. In general, birth parents reported considerable satisfaction with the Connections Project staff and services, and had few recommendations for improving project services. However, a subset expressed concerns about lack of direct feedback and intervention toward reunification.

Visitation

Parents were happy to see and interact with their children. Typical comments included, "I got to see my child more" and "It's made me realize how important it is to have a bond and a relationship with my child." Parents also appreciated having a different context for visits: "It gave us more freedom on where to meet for visits"; "It's given us a much better place to meet for visits, it's given me a chance to really get to know foster mom"; "More flexibility with visits"; "Longer visits"; "We had visits at the park instead of DCFS. That was great. Our bond (mother-child) was better, more relaxed."

Connections with Foster Parents

It was important to parents that the project helped them to connect with those caring for their children. One respondent stated, "It

created a safe space for my son. When he comes home, his foster parent *wants* to be a part of his life, the connection between me and the foster parents has been a very good thing." Other comments echoed this: "I got to be on a friendly basis with the foster family"; "It allowed us to get to know each other on a more personal level for the child's sake." One parent whose child was later placed for adoption stated, "I really wanted to see the face of the person that was taking my son, the look, just how the bond was going to be." Another, whose child had been returned, said of the foster mother, "I think she's going to be like a grandmother. We're still involved."

Relationships with Connections Project Social Workers

Birth parents saw the Connections Project workers as an important asset. Interview statements suggest that the worker's availability, support for visitation, and use of visitation notes to advocate for parents were all beneficial. One parent stated, "I think it helped get the kids home." An important component of this relationship for parents was a feeling of *respect*. One parent explained, "It was never judgmental, like where it is at the CPS office, it's really hard." Another stated, "You never felt that the Connections [Project] staff looked down on you… it was a big relief in the Connections Project. The support was there and they encouraged you, that was very important.… It's been a very human experience."

The Connections Project Services: Strengths and Limitations

Asked about areas where program services could be improved, birth parents saw little that needed to be changed. This finding is supported by the following typical comments: "I think that it's OK the way it is," "It's going pretty good. I don't think it needs improving," and "I think everything went fine." Indeed, one parent said, "For me it's been totally wonderful. In my case I don't think you could have done more. I do kind of miss having [the worker] come by though. It would be nice if the Connections [Project] worker could come by like once every three months or so. The kids do develop a bond with them too."

However, a subset of parents noted that the project could have more directly helped them to resolve the issues preventing them

from caring for their children. For example, one parent said that it was important for the workers to "be straightforward and let the parent know if they see something that needs to be done or something that could speed up the process to return home." In the same vein, another parent noted, "In my [service plan] it says that I don't follow any recommendations and I don't think she's [social worker] given me any. I think there needs to be better communication. She needs to let me know when she thinks things are going wrong instead of just sending in a bad report." A third parent made the concrete suggestion that it would be helpful "to give the birth parents the blank forms to what's expected of them prior to the beginning of the project and to get monthly or bimonthly reports to see how you are doing along the way." One parent wished for more contact with foster parents and another wished that project services could have continued when her child was placed with relatives.

These limitations notwithstanding, the project was successful in building relationships with parents, supporting their active participation in visitation, and connecting them with foster parents. The following section of the paper provides more detailed information on how the project staff used visitation to help birth parents, their children, and foster parents build connections within the difficult human realities of transitions, separation, and loss. Although the practice strategies we describe address experiences common across child welfare–involved families, we remind readers that this work took place in a particular context, with birth families who primarily were Caucasian.

The Connections Project: A Relational Approach to Visitation

Preparatory Contact with Birth Families

Early contacts with birth families set the stage for beginning and future work. Initial contact was made by phone. In these pre-visit phone calls, workers attempted to identify and address logistical

problems related to the visits (usually transportation) as well as to elicit and begin to respond to parents' other concerns.

Whenever possible, workers also met with birth parents before visits. During these initial meetings, worker actions were often more important than their talk (e.g., smiling, sustaining friendly eye contact, stretching a hand out and moving toward them, giving parents comfortable seating, and making sure there was no separating desk). The interviews included an exchange of names (with correct pronunciation), and further attention to any issues raised in the initial telephone contact. Importantly, this meeting included an explanation of what parents could expect during visits, including the fact that workers would be taking notes to record their progress and that this record would be shared with them and their child's DCFS worker.

When parents failed to keep appointments, workers approached this with understanding, recognizing parents' many obligations to mandated services and the realities of their often chaotic living circumstances. Foster parents and children were reminded that "things do come up," while emphasizing the good parts of the last visit and what to look forward to with the next. At the same time, the Connections Project workers were persistent in ensuring that interviews and visits did take place, since reliable visits helped to build trust with all concerned. Where possible, they also encouraged foster parents not only to provide transportation, but also to understand the value of bringing the child and showing their approval of the child's birth parent.

Safety

The Connections Project recognized mandated visits as a strategic time and place to build relationships with parents that can lead not only to safer parenting, but also to stronger connections among birth parents, foster parents, and children. In the structured environment afforded by visitation, safe interactions can be encouraged in an atmosphere conducive to all participants carrying a share in healing the breach of placement. Even an infant had

his turn when, responding to his foster parent's beckoning, he crawled to his mother.

Relational Strategies with Birth Parents

The Connections Project social workers used a variety of strategies to build relationships with birth parents, including

- responding to parents and their needs before those of the child (but reversing this order if the parents took it to mean that they were the "problem" rather than the child);
- giving time for parents to tell their story through concentrated listening, preferably without interruptions, and both tolerating and "leaning into" anger or upset (but following up with parents outside the visit regarding their concerns and issues);
- paying attention to body language, mood, silences, distress, and noticeable omissions;
- guarding against parents being overwhelmed but urging them to take heart, endure the necessary separation, and turn their energy toward restorative dealings with themselves, their child and the child welfare agency;
- precisely pointing out parents' strengths;
- diligently finding out what support relatives might give;
- whittling tasks down to a manageable list for both worker and parent, preferably recorded in writing by the parent; and
- reiterating parents' legal rights and emphasizing that whatever the outcome of dependency hearings, their child is forever part of their family.

Empathic Support

Birth parents come to visits and the task of connecting with their children with paralyzing fear and feelings of rejection, often from their families as well as from the world at large. Recognizing this, the workers took pains to acknowledge and validate parents' feelings. During visits, the consistent, committed presence of the Connections Project workers seemed an invisible force which

kindled warmer feelings in parents to self and child. With time, parents could then begin to separate the hurt of the child from their own. A child causing shame in the mother by running to the foster mother instead of the mother could be reinterpreted as the child's natural preference for the one providing the security of daily care. At the same time, the workers attempted to build on and strengthen the child's early, often tentative links with birth parents.

Given support without judgment, parents could begin to move beyond their immobilizing confusion, anger, grief, and shame over the court-ordered removal of their child, to which they were understandably opposed. The workers' empathy and enthusiasm for the possibilities in parents' relationships with their children released parents to hold themselves not entirely responsible and helped them to let go of some of their self-defensiveness. As parents began to experience more satisfying connections with their children, their jealousy of foster parents also decreased.

Repeatedly reiterated were two unalterable facts: parents were and would always be the birth parent, despite what had happened in the past or would happen in the future, and children have an attachment to their birth parents that is forever, no matter where they are living. Whether unseen or visible, pleasing or intolerable, this attachment is there: One birth mother presented herself in visitation as listlessly disinterested in her child. Calm, carefully timed, repeated overtures by the worker and the foster mother drew the mother into a maternal awakening to her role and motivation to relearn parenting. This circle of concern among foster and birth parent and the child was still there two years after the mother took on her responsibilities with the foster mother.

Healing the Pain of Separation

The visit is a laboratory in microcosm for exploring the means to ameliorate the searing pain of separation for parents and children. Whether this is apparent in the sad face, the dull eyes, the furtive glances, the turned-away stance, or simply not noticeable even under scrutiny, children are aware of the fact of separation due to

placement as well as the impending separation of the current visit. Games such as peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek were very popular with children during visits, possibly because they gave the child control of when they could disappear or reappear—something they were unable to do in their placement. One child exercised control over separation by taking charge of when and for how long his mother was to hide. An infant with his "Linus" blanket grabbed for it when his mother was temporarily out of sight, later not returning it: This mother, who tended to view her infant as part of herself, could clearly see that he had reactions differing from her.

Dealing with the pain of the goodbyes at the end of the visit is a manageable way of nipping at the trauma of separation, which would be intolerable to the child in toto (Haight, Black, Workman, & Tata, 2001). Goodbye times were ritualized with songs, snuggling, a reassuring script, Polaroid pictures taken during the visit and sent home with all, and exchange of visit boxes containing treats and transitional objects. At the close of visitation sessions, the workers also reviewed plans for the next visit. Prolonging separation at visit's end results in feelings of anguish, helplessness, and loss of hope. Workers eased this by announcing firmly when the visit was over, reminding both parents and children that they were just saying goodbye temporarily, and reaffirming the next visit.

Bringing Back Happier Times

Workers helped parents and children relive some of their happier times during visits. Parents seemed just to be waiting to tell about something joyful that had happened between them and their child in the past. Buried in every parent's tales was evidence of positive capacities, which could be put to good for the task at hand.

Attending to Developmental Needs

Due to the pressures of their own needs, parents frequently demanded performances of their children without knowledge and/or consideration of the child's developmental level, abilities, or disabilities. Workers thus spoke plainly to parents about child

development, placing the child's behavior within the wide range of normalcy for growth and development, and making allowances for disabilities, with which both children and parents were much encumbered. Some relief from feelings that they or their children had failed came when parents' attempts to engage with their children were guided by realistic understanding of the child's developmental capacities.

To some extent with all parents, but particularly with those who were young and/or developmentally delayed, workers and foster parents often took on the role of a constructive parent. When change was laborious, parents were led to engage where they had something to give. Often this meant parent and child playing as one child with another. Feeling less afraid and intimidated by their child, some parents could then be inspired to tackle more challenging parenting tasks, including the dreaded issue of appropriate discipline.

Providing Safe Discipline

Sensitive attentiveness to the ways in which parents disciplined their children was an important aspect of visits. Workers offered suggestions and corrections cautiously and in ways that did not offend parents' pride or undermine their authority. They acknowledged that many parents had reason to be angry about the damaging treatment that they had themselves received as children and that this anger could now erupt in the discipline of their children. Without excusing their behavior, parents were helped to see that their anger might arise out of fear that they were losing control, that the child might be hurt, hurt others, or disgrace them. Workers demonstrated alternative strategies gently, mostly through modeling rather than intellectual discussions.

Many times during visits parents would attempt to turn the child over to the worker or the foster parent when intercession seemed necessary. This was an opening for workers to model a restriction by word or manner and then turn control back to the parent. When one parent worried that her newly learned disciplinary methods would get her into trouble with her child welfare worker,

she was assured that her parenting was not too harsh. Parents gained confidence through asserting themselves appropriately with their child, a change from fearing the child's dominance of them and loss of pride in their position as parent.

A core value here was that parents who are already struggling with having been labeled as unfit should not experience further blame or stigma. Most birth parents were starved for being told that they have done something "right." Praise was given to parents' improved parenting during visits and their efforts to secure the return of their child: affirming interactions that awaken talents for better parenting and help them grow in confidence (Marcenko & Striepe, 1997).

Creating Lively, Fun Visits

Considerable effort went into making visits lively, fun, and engaging. During visits, foster parents and children gave accounts of progress and pleasures they had had. Ball playing and blowing bubbles spurred spontaneity, and gave parent and child independence from the worker. Parents were advised to bring games, especially those the child previously enjoyed. As play unfolded, the workers provided politic suggestions so that the child could win, which some parents initially found difficult. Parents were also asked to save their worries for discussion with their worker outside of visits.

Attending to Physical Sensations

Bodily knowledge is an essential but overlooked domain of practice (Tangenberg & Kemp, 2002). During visits, the Connections Project workers paid careful attention to the power of physical sensations and the ways these might serve the child's needs.

Smell

Parents were invited to bring familiar items from home, particularly used clothing or toys with strong, familiar odors. When a mother bathed her child during a visit she cuddled him saying, "Mmm, he smells just like he used to."

Touch

Even for older children, being cradled in the parents' arms brought relief from distress, sadness, and anger. A child baking cookies with his mother began a smearing game between them saying, "This was fun when I slimed you." During visits, mother and foster mother sometimes cuddled a child together, cradled by "connected parents."

Sound

Stressed, overwhelmed parents often find it difficult to respond positively when their children are yelling, banging toys, or even crying. Yet hearing the parent's voice has restorative power. Children always tuned in to sweet, precious sounds from parents, and in response they cooed, sang, and spoke cheerfully.

Sight

Increasing eye contact among all participants was a big help in connecting parents and their children. Eye contact can instantaneously span the distance resulting from separation. Young children also needed reminders that their parents actually existed when they were not in view. Polaroid photographs to take back to the foster home helped keep alive those crucial images and gave children and parents control of at least a small aspect of their lives within the labyrinth of placement. Visual and written materials, such as artwork and school reports, helped relieve parents from too much talk.

Nonverbal Communication

Workers also encouraged parents to follow their children's nonverbal cues. One mother learned to keep turning her infant toward her so that the infant did not need to keep craning her neck and kicking. Given help with a game, the mother covered the infant with a blanket, asked, "Where'd you go?" and, when she uncovered her, shouted cheerfully, "There she is."

Food

Converting feeding times from battlegrounds to gleeful sharing of treats was messy yet essential ground for fueling attachment.

Parents would bring favorite foods to the visit, but would also need to be prevented from stuffing their child in their wish to try to please, in their zeal to appear as giving parents.

Providing Feedback

The smallest advancement was celebrated: parents left the visits counting on these favorable reports to assist in the return of their child to them. At the same time, workers were specific in sharing lack of progress with parents. Despite exhortations that they were able to do better, and careful explanations about their case plans and court reviews, some parents disputed or denied what was gently told them, and instead seemed to dig into a rebuttal position with the outer appearance of no change. Others faced the reality that they could not change enough for their child to be returned, even though they were more safely and gratifyingly connected. For these parents, the connection with the child and with the foster family became an essential springboard for their ability to plan for the child's placement. Key elements in this process included planning for future contacts with their child, as well as for exiting dependency proceedings with a sense of self respect that they could carry into other parts of their lives. The Connections Project workers engaged these parents with deep compassion in this awful decision and loss, giving permission for their anger, their disappointment in themselves, and their despair over their earlier life.

Benchmarks of Progress Shown by Parents in the Project

The Connections Project looked to a range of indicators of parents' progress beyond the usual markers of parental involvement, such as attendance, attitudes, and use of mandated services. These included the following:

- Gaining the ability to maintain composure in beginning and ending visits and to help with easing the transitions for their child
- Being less absorbed with their own needs and more giving to their child

- Being able to see their child as separate from themselves without feeling deprived of the child's closeness and affection
- Evidencing less blaming of others and fewer recitals of woes of the past
- Displaying greater warmth and regard for their child and to others in the helping equation
- Showing evidence of increased energy for life, including moving ahead with more confidence in parenting and with satisfactions in life beyond parenting
- Seeking treatment for their personal issues, and recognizing the ways in which these have contributed to their current difficulties
- Showing changes in attitudes, behaviors and life circumstances such that plans could be made to create permanency for their child, whether through return home or an alternative plan
- Having the capacity to endure the agonizing reality of child welfare involvement without undue bitterness, despair, or damaging escapes

One birth mother, a victim of severe neglect in childhood, had only limited ability to meet her own needs, and only barely met them. She gave birth to two children in quick succession. Each in turn was removed from her care and placed together in the same adoptive home with her full cooperation. Throughout each placement there were frequent visitation and telephone calls. When, with each child in turn attempts at reunification were unsuccessful and adoption became the agency's plan, the mother asked the foster parents to help choose and get acquainted with the adoptive home. The foster parents worked expertly with the fears of the birth mother and also with those of the adoptive home in the separations involved and to develop a plan for ongoing contact. Four and half years after the adoptive placements, a mutually agreeable connection continued between the birth mother and both families. The mother's subsequent job training enabled her to support herself; she had no more pregnancies.

The Role of Foster Parents in the Connections Project

The project also focused on strengthening the ties between birth parents and foster parents (Gerring, 1996, 2005). Support for these efforts was provided by a foster parent panel, which provided ongoing consultation to the project team. Strategies for linking foster and birth parents recommended by the panel included the following.

Initial Phone Contacts (with DCFS Approval) Prior to the First Visit

Foster parents introduced themselves, heard what birth parents had to say about how they were doing, responded to questions about the child, reassured parents that their child was safe, and expressed eagerness to meet them. Foster parents also emphasized that they were temporarily caring for the child and that the birth parents' role in the child's life was irreplaceable.

Foster Parent Connections During Visits

Foster parents were urged to bring the child to visits. Children always related more favorably to their birth parent when they were accompanied by their foster parents. Foster parents understood that for the child, visitation was a strange place, with strange persons and maybe even a birth parent who had become strange to them in the period since removal. At the same time, the foster parents also needed help making connections. Then, in the face-to-face encounter, tolerance, understanding, and empathy emerged. One foster parent voiced something that many others felt, which was that during visits she saw how her foster child loved her birth mother, despite the mother's severe neglect and abuse.

As birth parents began to trust that the foster parents cared about them as well as their child, on their own volition they revealed information which provided foster parents with an informed base for handling issues otherwise only guessed at. In telephone calls between visits, parents and foster parents sometimes were more open than in person, leading to more fruitful connections in future visits. Birth families quickened to the advice and modeling of foster parents more than to any other motivators. As foster parents felt friendship with birth parents, they were more

able to circumvent ownership contests, to avoid giving in to displays of their disciplinary feats in ways that would "show up" the birth parent, to overcome their fears of harm from the birth family, and to begin a journey toward egalitarianism with people of many differences, usually including backgrounds, economics, culture and status.

Transporting her three-year-old foster child partway to visits was all that one foster mother would do because she was afraid of the mother's drug-using and sometimes violent boyfriend, who was known to disregard orders to stay away from the mother. The Connections Project worker enlisted the DCFS worker to set up security; the foster mother began to cautiously attend visits but said nothing. The child became more vivacious and at a later visit grabbed the hand of both mothers for the customary picture taking. The foster mother became very active in explaining her caretaking to a very attentive mother with the worker praising them both as well as alerting them to the child's bright eyes turned to hear their conversations. In due time, the DCFS worker informed them of plans for the child's return to the mother. The foster mother declared to the worker that she could see how much her foster child loved her mother and how much the mother needed help, so she would continue to assist the mother on the child's return.

Practice Implications

By focusing on visitation, the Connections Project created an unusual opportunity for detailed attention to small but essential details and processes in relationship building with birth parents. The project staff formed supportive relationships with parents that, in parallel process, modeled the key relational elements the project aimed to develop in the relationships between parents and their children: respect, sensitivity, empathic responsiveness, flexibility, constancy, and concern. Once forged, such relationships provided a base from which parents could become more fully engaged with their children, with foster parents, and with other needed services. Through relationship-based practice, using skills that with

moderate levels of training and regular supervision are in reach of all child welfare social workers, the Connections Project workers created strong parent-worker partnerships, supported parents' connections with their children, and facilitated productive working relationships between birth and foster parents.

More challenging for the project to accomplish, as some birth parents pointed out in their qualitative feedback, was the development of cross-walks between the project's services and the ability of parents to demonstrate the overall progress required for DCFS to recommend reunification with their children. For reasons that are difficult to untangle, the numbers of children reunified with their birth families were lower than would have been anticipated given the high rates of visitation (Marcenko et al., 2004). Possible contributing factors range from the scope of family needs and young age of the participating children to the project's structural positioning as a supplemental child welfare service. This mixed finding—that the project was very successful in engaging parents but less successful in helping parents and DCFS caseworkers use these connections as a springboard for meeting other mandated requirements—points to the need to clearly articulate and monitor the links among the various components of child welfare services.

The Connections Project nonetheless serves as an important reminder of the central value of supervised visitation in efforts to engage and work with birth families. Following the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, services to children have taken priority in child welfare practice over those to families (Kemp et al., 2005; Smith & Donovan 2003). In the face of competing and often overwhelming demands on workers, visitation frequently is supervised by less skilled workers through contracted services, removing from the child welfare practice repertoire a singular opportunity for productive engagement and relational change. The Connections Project reaffirms the rich potential in visitation, the very "heart of the matter" (Hess & Proch, 1993).

A veteran foster mother, the kind who tended to pronounce the final words on matters, proclaimed the following about making

connections to the birth family: "The kids we were most successful with were the ones where we helped the whole family." For all workers with children and their families, it does well to realize that one can never know just when one's efforts may spark a change for the better within a parent or child. And deep within them, in their darkest hour, may still be lodged a faint remembrance of how hard someone had tried with them.

References

Bowlby, J. (1982). Attachment and loss: Retrospect and prospect. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 52*(4), 664–678.

Burton, D., & Showell, P. (1997). Partnership parenting in foster care. *Families in Society, 75,* 520–521.

Dawson, K., & Berry, M. (2002). Engaging families in child welfare services: An evidence-based approach to best practice. *Child Welfare, 81*(2), 293–317.

deBoer, C., & Coady, N. (2007). Good helping relationships in child welfare: Learning from stories of success. *Child & Family Social Work, 12,* 32–42.

Dore, M., & Alexander, L. (1996). Preserving families at risk of child abuse and neglect: The role of the helping alliance. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 20,* 349–361.

Drake, B. (1994). Relationship competencies in child welfare services. *Social Work, 39,* 595–602.

Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Deal, A. (1994). *Supporting and strengthening families*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

Gerring, C. E. (1996). A new family constellation in foster care. *Journal of Child and Youth Care, 11*(2), 39–50.

Gerring, C. E. (1997). Mea culpa and other probings, practices, and thoughts on foster family constellations. *Journal of Child and Youth Care, 11*(3), 83–84.

Gerring, C. E. (2005). Foster parents' potential to help rescue the foster care system, *Relational Child & Youth Care Practice, 17*(4), 32–41.

Gowen, J. W., & Nebrig, J. B. (1997). Infant-mother attachment at risk: How early intervention can help. *Infants and Young Children, 9*(4), 62–78.

Haight, W. I., Black, J., Mangelsdorf, S., Giorgio, G., Tata, L., Schoppe, S., & Szewczyk, M. (2002). Making visits better: The perspectives of parents, foster parents, and child welfare workers. *Child Welfare, 86,* 173–202.

Haight, W. I., Black, J. E., Workman, C. L., & Tata, L. (2001). Parent-child interaction during foster care visits. *Social Work, 46*(4), 325–338.

Halpern, R. (1997). Good practice with multiply vulnerable young families: Challenges and principles. *Children & Youth Services Review, 19*(4), 253–275.

Hess, P. (2005). Visits: Critical to the well-being and permanency of children and youth in care. In G. Mallon & P. Hess (Eds.), *Child welfare for the twenty-first century* (pp. 548–557). New York: Columbia University Press.

Hess, P. M., & Proch, K. (1993). Visiting: The heart of the matter. In B. Pine, P. Warsh, & A. Maluccio (Eds.), *Together again: Family reunification in foster care* (pp. 119–139). Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Jivanjee, P. (1999). Parent perspectives on family involvement in therapeutic foster care. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 8*, 451–461.

Karen, R. (1994). *Becoming attached: The mystery of the infant-mother bond and its impact on later life*. New York: Warner Books.

Kelly, J. F., & Barnard, K. E. (2000). Assessment of parent-child interaction: Implications for early intervention. In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Miesels (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kemp, S. P., Allen-Eckard, K., Ackroyd, A., Becker, M. F., & Burke, T. K. (2005). Community family support meetings: Connecting families, public child welfare, and community resources. In G. P. Mallon & P. M. Hess (Eds.). *Child welfare for the twenty-first century: A handbook of practices, policies, and programs* (pp. 102–117). New York: Columbia University Press.

Leathers, S. J. (2002). Parental visiting and family reunification: Could inclusive practice make a difference? *Child Welfare, 81*, 595–616.

Lee, C., & Ayón, C. (2004). Is the client-worker relationship associated with better outcomes in mandated child abuse cases? *Research on Social Work Practice, 14*, 351–357.

Linares, O., Montalto, D., Li, M., & Oza, V. (2006). A promising parenting intervention in foster care. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 74*, 32–41.

Maluccio, A. N., Fein, E., & Davis, I. P. (1994). Family reunification: research findings, issues, and directions. *Child Welfare, 73*(5), 489–504.

Marcenko, M. O., Kemp, S. P., & Brennan, K. (2004). Birth family-foster family connections project evaluation: Final report to the Stuart Foundation. Unpublished monograph.

Marcenko, M. O., & Striepe, M. I. (1997). A look at family reunification through the eyes of mothers. *Community Alternatives, 9*, 33–48.

McKay, M., Stoewe, J., McCadam, K., & Gonzales, J. (1998). Increasing access to child mental health services for urban children and their caregivers. *Health and Social Work, 23,* 9–15.

Milner, J. (1987). An ecological perspective on duration of foster care. *Child Welfare, 66*, 113-123.

Minuchin, P., Colapinto, J., & Minuchin, S. (1998). *Working with families of the poor*. New York: Guilford Press.

Palmer, S. E. (1995). *Maintaining family ties: Inclusive practice in foster care*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Palmer, S., Maieter, S., & Manji, S. (2006). Effective intervention in child protective services: Learning from parents. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28,* 812–824.

Pasztor, E., McNitt, M., & McFadden, E. (2005). Foster parent recruitment, development, support and retention: Strategies for the twenty-first century. In G. Mallon & P. Hess (Eds.), *Child welfare for the twenty-first century* (pp. 548–557). New York: Columbia University Press.

Pecora, P. (1989). Improving the quality of child welfare services: Needs assessment for staff training. *Child Welfare, 68*(4), 403–419.

Poirier, M., & Simard, M. (2006). Parental involvement during the placement of a child in family foster care: Factors associated with the continuation of parental roles. *Child and Youth Care Forum, 35,* 277–288.

Sanchirico, A., & Jablonka, K. (2000). Keeping foster children connected to their biological parents: The impact of foster parent training and support. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal, 17,* 185–203.

Smith, B., & Donovan, S. (2003). Child welfare practice in organizational and institutional context. *Social Service Review, 77,* 541–563.

Tangenberg, K., & Kemp, S. P. (2002). Embodied practice: Claiming the body's experience, agency, and knowledge for social work practice. *Social Work, 47*(1), 9–18.