



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

—
Research Centre
for Children and
Families



Practice learnings and resources,
Fostering Lifelong Connections:

Supporting parents and family members through debriefing

Presented by:

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Tree of Knowledge

pokerwork on kangaroo skin

Lynette Riley, 2010

We acknowledge the tradition of custodianship and law of the Country on which the University of Sydney campuses stand. We pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for country.

Supporting parents and family members through debriefing

- It's important to provide children's parents and family members with opportunities to have their say about family time.
 - This can help ensure family time is a positive experience for all involved.
- Caseworkers can check in with parents and family members prior to Family Time by asking open-ended questions such as: *How are you going? What's been happening? Has anything come up that might affect your next Family Time visit?*
- Caseworkers can also check in afterwards by asking: *What happened that made you feel good/not so good? What could I have done to help? What could you try next time?*

Case Study

Josh and Angela



Background

Josh is 14 years old and now in stable long-term foster care after more than ten years in care and several placement disruptions. ADHD and complex trauma make communication and emotional regulation harder for Josh.

His mother, Angela lives with mental illness and this can prevent her attending planned visits, cancelling at short notice. When they are together, Josh often spends visits playing computer games rather than talking with his mother.

Casework Support

Debriefing helped Angela express how guilty she felt about cancelling visits and seek help to make visits more interactive and meaningful. The caseworker suggested Angela put limits on Josh's computer time during visits and reassured Josh that Angela always wanted to see him but her mental illness meant this was not always possible. The caseworker encouraged them to exchange phone numbers. Angela reported that when she called, Josh rarely answered or had little to say.

The caseworker offered to schedule phone calls in advance so Josh could prepare himself and have conversation topics handy. Although he still doesn't like talking on the phone, he enjoys sending Angela text messages with memes and emojis. Angela sends Josh funny cat videos because she knows how much he likes cats and wants him to know she is thinking of him when they are apart and when she isn't well enough to see him.

Practice Learnings



Practice



Outcomes

Co-design with two mothers and in consultation with Expert Reference Group members

Light in the Dark

Bringing your feelings into the light so you can learn to heal

Emotional pain is like carrying a heavy weight. You may want the weight to be lifted or fear it will be with you forever. Feeling like this for a long time stresses the body. Understanding the early warning signs of stress allows you to take charge of your life.

Small things can trigger big reactions

- You get stressed over lost keys or running late
- You have trouble sleeping
- You are in the emotional 'early warning' zone
- You may say and do things you regret
- You may have conflict with other people

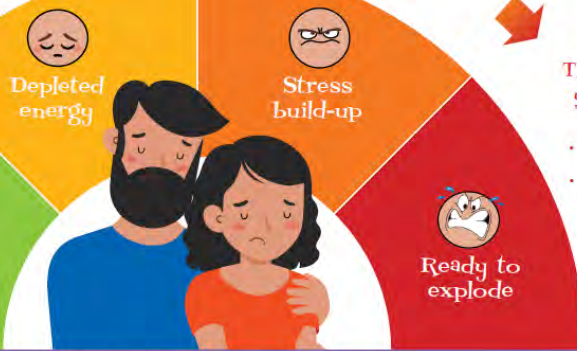
Things related to your child will trigger big reactions

- Family time is cancelled at short notice or goes badly
- You feel grief and pain rising to the surface
- You are entering the emotional 'amber' zone
- You may feel distress, panic or numbing
- People may think you are being unreasonable

You are feeling calm and positive

- You can cope with everyday upsets
- You are in the emotional 'green' zone
- You enjoy today and feel optimistic about tomorrow

Calm state



Things that reignite your pain can be overwhelming

- It might be Mother's/Father's Day or your child's birthday
- You feel the weight of anger, shame and fear return
- You have entered the emotional 'red zone'
- Your reactions become unpredictable
- Your actions may frighten you and other people

Ready to explode



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rcf.research@sydney.edu.au | www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html
 This resource was co-designed with experts-by-experience, Tegan Whittaker and Chantelle Rozzi
 Developed as part of the ARC Linkage project *Fostering Lifelong Connections for Children in Permanent Care* (LP18010332)



Light in the Dark

Powering the healing journey

Wherever you are today, you can take steps today to start your journey and get the support you deserve.



Parents can feel like they are always waiting for something:

- for court dates
- for support services
- to see their child
- to bring their child home

It is not a sign of weakness to need to work on your emotional self. It takes a lot of strength to do this and to ask for help.

What you can do for yourself today:

- Spend time with people who understand your pain
- Spend time in nature or on Country to feel calm and connected
- Do small, good things for yourself (eat a nourishing meal, listen to your favourite song)
- Notice even the small moments when you feel strong and resilient



What you can learn about yourself today:

- What do you notice about yourself when you feel calm and connected?
- What do others notice about you when you seem calm and connected?
- What piece of advice have you been given that really meant something?
- What small step can you take now that would change your situation?



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Nourishing the first spark of connection

Remember that there is enough love to go around

Children thrive when they are surrounded by people who love them. When parents know what is happening for their child, they can support them and the adults around them to make the most of Family Time.

Your child may be trying to:

- Adjust to changed routines
- Understand where they belong
- Avoid upsetting you
- Sustain friendships
- Stay in touch with family
- Express difficult emotions
- Work out what they want from Family Time

What they may be feeling:

Fear, Sadness, Guilt, Anxiety, Shame, Confusion

What you might be feeling:

Anxiety, Grief, Shame, Guilt, Anger, Sadness

Parents can help by:

- Telling them you are proud of them
- Reassuring them that you are okay
- Celebrating the positives with them
- Avoiding promises you can't keep
- Being consistent
- Asking what they want to do
- Involving their carers
- Focusing on making time together enjoyable
- Sharing photos, drawings and letters
- Giving honest, age-appropriate answers to questions
- Bringing a toy or something they can take home

Strengthening all the sparks of connection

How parents can support the adults who care for their child and improve Family Time

There are things parents can do to show support for their child and strengthen important connections at Family Time.

Your child's carer may be:

- Balancing care needs of multiple children
- Lacking information about your child's history
- Getting to know your child
- Following agency rules
- Lacking certainty about how long your child will stay with them

What they may be feeling:

Uncertain, Stressed, Helpless, Overwhelmed, Protective

Parents can help by:

- Suggesting a meeting with carer and caseworker
- Showing you want to help your child settle in
- Being open about your goals and feelings
- Listening to their goals and feelings
- Suggesting that you have a communication book
- Sending letters/photos to update them and your child

Your child's caseworker may be:

- Balancing the needs of multiple families
- Following policies and procedures
- Experiencing burnout and stress
- Continuing to develop skills and knowledge
- Facing time or resource pressures
- Coping with staffing shortages

What they may be feeling:

Frustrated that they can't make things better, Pressured by the agency, Blamed by families for past decisions

Parents can help by:

- Suggesting how to support you and your child
- Allowing them time to respond to your queries
- Keeping records of agreements
- Being open about your concerns
- Giving details of your culture, values, beliefs
- Updating them on changes to your situation
- Asking for advance notice of caseworker changes

Co-design with two mothers and in consultation with Expert Reference Group members

Shining your own light on Family Time

Check in with your feelings as Family Time approaches and after it ends

Ask yourself:

- What helps me feel grounded?
- What makes me feel out of control?
- What helps me show my child they are loved?
- What do others notice when I am doing well?

What can I do to make the visit good?

- Know your limits and your triggers
- Notice and accept the feelings that come up
- Have some games and activities up your sleeve
- Pack some healthy snacks

What if I am not feeling okay?

- Ask to have a phone or video visit instead this time
- Talk to people involved in Family Time about your feelings so they don't misunderstand why you were not there

Things to remember:

- Give as much notice as possible if you need to cancel a visit and suggest an alternative so your child knows you want to see them.
- If you continue to struggle with visits, get professional help to unpack the issues and work out a way to get visits back on track.
- The hard moments will pass.

Things to remember:

- Quality is more important than quantity when it comes to time together.
- Do something nice for yourself or arrange to speak to someone after a visit to prevent a downward spiral.
- Have some strategies in mind for when you are finding things hard.

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For more ideas and resources for parents, go to:

Shining your own light on Family Time

Remember to care for yourself so you can care for your child

Ask for help

- To give you space
- To support your choices
- To talk about what is going on for you
- To understand your feelings
- To process changes
- To exchange photos with your child
- To write letters to your child

Self-Awareness

- Do a mindfulness colouring-in book to ground yourself
- Sit somewhere quiet and focus on regular breaths
- Start tracking your moods
- Connect to your special place

Self-care and healing

- Take time out just for you
- Relax with friends
- Power your body with good food
- Keep a journal of how you feel
- Listen to music that brings you joy
- Be active – you can even dance inside the house!
- Take a walk in nature
- Get crafty – make something to give your child

Create an action plan

- Start with small steps
- Make a vision board
- List what you need to get on track
- Seek support to make your plans a reality

Notice and celebrate successes

- Count the small things – even if it's getting out of bed!
- Track each thing you have done to reach your goal
- Keep records of courses, community sessions or workshops you have attended

Make small goals

- For your personal growth
- For your time with children and family members
- For making Family Time more positive
- For reigniting important connections
- For initiating changes to legal orders

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Reflective exercise

Think about a parent of a child you work with.

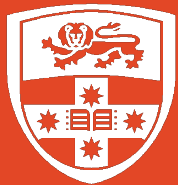
- When was the last time you checked in with them about their views about family time? What did they say?
- What questions could you ask next time you check in with them?
- How could you use these resources to spark a conversation with the parent about their experiences with family time?

Connect With Us

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