

When Family Visits Are Difficult: Why Are They So Hard for So Many Children?

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In the May/June, 2015, issue of **Fostering Families Today** Allison Randall and I wrote about different aspects of family visitation for children in foster care. Allison's article, "Is This Normal?" focused on why children in foster care often have difficulty with family visitation and what might be the reasons for those difficulties.

Then, my column on the next two pages gave examples of what you can do to help children who have these kinds of **big** reactions to family visits. We hope that information has been helpful to you.

Now here's more to the story:

If you are foster parenting a child whose birth family is still an active part in the child's (and your) life, and things are going well, **Congratulations to you!** If you are "successfully" negotiating this difficult balance, then you've already figured out ways to make life easier for you, your foster child, and your family. That's terrific!

Probably many people have offered helpful (and maybe not-so-helpful) hints to you about making this dual-family balancing act go smoothly. My friend John DeGarmo, writes many helpful tips, including "Do's" and "Don't's" written from his perspective as a professional in the field, and as a foster, adoptive, and birth parent. If you don't know John's work, check out: ExpertBeacon, Inc. or just Google John ... he writes helpful articles and books that can be great guides when you need a new perspective or just some practical suggestions to try.

Let's look at visitation now as something that often creates its own specific kind of stress for children in foster care, and so for you as a parent of that child.

Why Can The Issue of Family Visitation Be So Confusing?

We know that children are often placed in foster care because of abuse or neglect. If you were abused by someone, and that abuse hurt very badly, then you can imagine how frightening it can be when you are forced to even be in the same room again with

the person who abused you. But that is what happens to many children in care: they are required to visit adults who abused them.

On the surface, that seems crazy just by itself, doesn't it?

And yet, for many of these children, the feelings of fear that family visitations bring up are what some of us in the field call "Double Dip Feelings"—in other words, yes, they feel afraid all over again. But they also have other feelings.

For example, your foster child may miss some happy things about his or her family. The child may wish with all of his or her heart that parents will "get better so I can go home."

For example, many children come from a birth family in which parents were abusing themselves. On some level, these children know that their birth home isn't safe. And yet many of these children just want their parents to stop hurting themselves, both because they love their parents, and because they want to go home. Deep down, too, they want their parents to love them enough to stop the actions that got the children into foster care in the beginning.

So, what do they feel? They probably feel a mix-up of anger, fear, and also a deep longing that their parents will shape up, do what they need to do to get clean and healthy, so they can go back to their family without having to worry about being hurt through fear, abuse, or neglect.

What This "Confused" Behavior Can Look Like

Just by itself, all of those feelings mixed up together can be confusing to the child. Well, what do we as grown-ups do when we get confused? Especially if that confusion is mixed with fear and anger?

Most of us go into our own version of "fight, flight, or freeze" – we might hit and scream (fight), or try to hide or run away instead of going to the visit (flight), or just try to stop feeling anything at all, and look a bit like a "deer in the headlights," frozen in place, not saying or doing anything in particular.

We might also have behaviors like nightmares, or refusing to eat or eating too much, or getting “stuck” in some behavior that we do over and over and over again, as if we can’t stop. Or maybe we feel like crying over the least little thing.

Our children may do some or all of these things when they know that a family visit is coming. And it is often reported that many children have bad dreams or even nightmares after the visit, and that their behavior is more negative until a few days have passed.

I hope that Allison Randall’s thoughts and the suggestions I described in the last issue have been of help to you about these negative behaviors.

Why Is All of This Important to Me? To My Foster Child?

Knowledge and understanding are just about the most important thing in foster parenting. **Why** does my child act this way? **What** is my foster child thinking or feeling right now, and **How** can I help? **When** should I do or say something, or is it better to just let them work it out by themselves? And **Where** do I go, if my foster child or I need help?

When you begin to ask these questions and actually feel confident in answers that you – or others – come up with, then you can begin to use your very best thinking to bring some peace to you, your foster child’s, and your family’s lives again.

How Do I Help My Child with “Double Dip Feelings”? Start with the FUN!

First, let me say that suggestions I will give here are those that are tried and true – they have worked for thousands of foster, adoptive, birth, traumatized, and emotionally disabled children and their families for years.

Please don’t look at them and say to yourself, “I can’t do this!” Or, “My child will NEVER do this!” Even if it seems silly, or crazy, or you don’t think of yourself as somebody who “plays,” just bear with me. We’ll talk about more “serious” stuff in a few paragraphs.

- 1) When “Double Dip Feelings” (those behaviors that show that your child is confused and perhaps frightened, such as before or after a family visit), play a

quick, simple “action” game with him that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Any game can be this way: even playing balloon-toss can have a beginning, “I’ll count to 3 and then toss the balloon to you,” a middle, “We’ll go back and forth to each other across the room,” and an end, “We’ll stop when we toss and catch the balloon 5 times.” Don’t ask permission to play, just start. More often than not, your child will join in, especially when he knows there’s an ending. And, having an ending helps your child to not get overwhelmed in the game and then can’t stop.

- 2) After playing a simple game, play a game that allows your child to express frustration, fear, anger, or other “double dip feelings” in a safe, controlled way. The purpose is to “get the mad out,” safely and happily. A good example of this is the “newspaper throw” where each person (including you, parents!) crumples up pages and pages of a newspaper and when you say “Go!” everyone throws the newspaper “balls” at each other. That’s it! It’s hysterically fun, especially when you let yourself get into it! The trick? Set a time limit before you start, and stick to it. If everyone does well with stopping when the time limit is up, and it seems as if this is a good way to “get the mad out,” then do it again later in the day. But do have an ending; it’s much better that way so no one gets out of control.
- 3) Take a walk with your child. No running, no rushing, even a 10 minute walk around the block a few times. Walking in tandem (next to each other, even matching steps) helps to bring calm and closeness. Eventually, although you may have to be the one to start the conversation, there will most likely be a natural sharing of thoughts. Just keep your comments light and positive, and then see what happens.

As to more serious ways to address “double dip feelings,” here are two simple ideas that may be helpful:

- 1) You and your child each draw a simple picture of some room in your home on the day **before** the family visit. Then draw a similar, simple picture together **after** returning home. If your child gets into the habit of drawing **along side of you**, eventually, most likely, your child will start talking about her confusing feelings. All you really need to do, then, is sympathize and listen. Try to NOT be your

child's therapist. Don't interpret what your child is saying. Just listen and say something back to your child like, "That must be hard for you. I'm so sorry."

- 2) Share with your child an experience that you had that created "double dip feelings" for you. The story does not have to be about something terribly serious. In fact, if it's not too serious, it might be easier for your child to understand what you are showing her. Allow her to ask questions, and answer as honestly and simply as you can. This can help your child feel that she is not alone, and that it is "normal" to have confusing feelings.

I hope these several articles and columns have been helpful. I'd love to hear from you; contact me through my website, www.larkeshleman.com, and happy summer to you all!