

## “Is This Normal?” Worrisome Behaviors after Birth Family Visits and How Foster Parents Can Help

Allison Randall pre-edits

Throughout my years of clinical practice with families involved in foster care, I have heard an increasingly worrisome trend-children between infancy through 6 years old experiencing a wide range of “negative” behaviors surrounding visits with birth families. One particular family described how their normally docile and quiet 2 year old foster child would come back after family visits with her perpetrating birth mother biting herself until she would bleed. Another family described their 4 year old foster son who would scream, shake and cling to his foster mother’s leg as the social worker arrived to transport him to visits with his birth parents. More foster parents have called me in a panic describing the frightening and complex changes their children would exhibit surrounding the visits with birth parents/families. Each time, each foster parent would ask me “is this normal?”

As I have worked with these children and their foster parents, sadly this does seem to be the “norm”. These behaviors typically occur from before visits to immediately after visits and last for days. Families have reported almost always the same troubling behaviors such as baby talk or gibberish, blank distant stares, protracted severe and violent temper tantrums, nightmares, wetting and soiling themselves, peeing or defecating on the floor, clinginess, self-abuse and inconsolable crying. Social workers who transport the children to and from visits describe similar behavioral changes...one social worker reported an 18 month old child would scream louder and more frantically as they drove closer to the visitation center until the child would vomit. This happened EVERY SINGLE TIME. In order to help these little voices, I would turn to the Guardian Ad Litem and other legal advocates to see what could be done to help them...could the visits be stopped, etc. Each time, I was told “Children are expected to have problems surrounding visits. “ “It is normal” they would say. It may be “normal,” in that we might expect that it will happen. But I refuse to believe that it is healthy. I don’t think we should expect children to suffer such profound stress and I think we need to look deeper and try to determine what is happening so we can help instead of just shrugging our shoulders and as one social worker said “Visitation has to happen no matter what happens to the child”.

So what is happening? To answer this question, I turned to the research I could find. Some research states that what could be happening is “grief reactions”...the children are experiencing profound grief at the loss of their birth parents and the children should actually have more visits. The research would suggest then that the children’s reactions are “normal grief” associated with “being away from their parents”. I have worked with many children who experience grief reactions due to the death or separation of loving parents and although their grief is evident and it is similar to a degree to what children in foster care experience, it is in no way the same. My own children reacted at times when they were younger when separated from me with temper tantrums or clinginess. What I have experienced with children in foster care surrounding visits is different in every way from these “grieving children”. The intensity, the duration and the “rawness,” is the difference that separates the “normal grief” of securely attached children from the children in foster care. As one foster mother described...it is “like they are caged animals trying to express through their bodies intense pain but we as adults aren’t listening and can’t see.”

My professional opinion is different from some other professionals. But from what I have seen, I don't agree the children in foster care are grieving for their birth parents/families. In fact, what I see is the opposite. The children appear to be railing against the visits. They are trying to tell us through their behaviors they are experiencing "stress reactions" because they are seeing their birth families and are exposed to the very individuals week after week who neglected and abused them. They are trying through "FIGHT FLIGHT AND FREEZE" behaviors to tell us that these visits are causing them to experience post traumatic triggers. I believe that these children, all of whom in some way experienced complex trauma, are actually insecurely attached to their birth families and therefore are not longing to be reunited with them. Instead, I believe these children are telling us that they are re-experiencing -- week after week -- the same stress and trauma they experienced while they lived with the birth parents.

Yet, sadly, there is not enough research to support my hypothesis. We only have anecdotal evidence...not enough to change the policies which mandate that visitations between child and birth families must occur.

But that does not mean we need to sit back and allow the children to hurt. Clearly, if social workers and therapists can document the intense changes the child experiences surrounding visits, and advocates for the child in court can help Family Court Judges understand what is happening, visits can and should be changed. You as foster parents know firsthand what happens as the little ones cross your threshold after a visit...always write down what you see...have others witness the changes as well. Advocate strongly to anyone and everyone who can impact the child's life. Hopefully the best interest for the child will prevail.

In the meantime, Dr. Lark Eshleman and I have put together a list of things that you can do to help your child through what may be for him or her -- and for you -- very difficult and even terrifying experiences. Please see Dr. Lark's column also in this issue of Fostering Families. And please let us know how you're doing! We really care!

There are also a variety of concrete "techniques" that you can use to help your child transition from birth parent visits. First and foremost, please don't take their reactions personally. The child is not trying "to push you away" or show you "that he doesn't want to be with you." In fact, the very opposite is true...your child in foster care trusts you enough to show you her deepest hurts. I have found through the work with foster parents the following can help lessen the intensity of the child's stress reactions (the only thing that I have found to end the stress reactions is when the child no longer visits the birth family):

1. Advocate that the same social worker transport the child to and from visits each and every time...strongly advocate. If this is not possible, ask if you can assist with transporting the child to and from visits.
2. Make sure that the child has a "transitional" object that he or she can "take care" while she is at the visit...this could be a favorite teddy bear, a favorite blanket or even a tee shirt of yours. Make sure to advocate to all professionals involved that it is very important the child has access to this object during the visit and request the birth parent allow this to occur as it is in the child's best interest.

3. If you are unable to transport, request the social worker take a picture book with a picture of your house, you and the child and the child's room that the child can hold onto and reference while transitioning. Again very important to advocate the child has access to this...it is okay if this cannot go into visits with the child...make sure the social worker is sensitive to the child and reassures the child the picture book will stay in the car and remind the child "he is coming back to you".
4. Try to find a way to have the child transition to your home after visits. I have found the stress reactions last the longest when the child is transition back to day care or school after visits.
5. Upon the child's return, immediately begin a routine of soothing and nurturing activities to help the child "regulate" back. For one child I work with, she immediately calms when her foster mother holds her in a rocking chair and while the child drinks a soothing cup of warm chocolate milk, she sings to the child "you are my sunshine". Another child's foster mother reports that she has to take her child immediately to the playground where they play game after game of "tag". Observe your foster child and understand what regulates them when under "normal" stress...then utilize those same techniques more intensely during the next 24 hours.
6. Rely on your supports, especially the child's therapist for other useful ways to assist the child in "regulation" and "attunement" so as to calm and sooth as much as you can.

These are only a few suggestions to help the littlest victims of neglect and abuse surrounding birth parent visits. There are many more things that can help mitigate the intense stress "FIGHT FLIGHT and FREEZE " reactions of your child in foster care. Seek out professional support and resources. Most importantly, advocate for the youngest victims...just because they no longer live with trauma, doesn't mean they don't still feel the trauma.

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