

## SESSION 7 – RETURN AND BREAKDOWN

# BIRTH PARENTS AS A FACTOR OF SUCCESS



A  
(new)  
perspective  
on foster care research and practice

Dirk Schäfer, University of Siegen

# 1. RESEARCH EXPERIENCES: CONTACTING BIRTH-FAMILIES

- ❖ Establishing contact
- ❖ Making contact
- ❖ Keeping contact
- ❖ Challenges for researchers

# ESTABLISHING CONTACT

- ❖ the most difficult group to reach
- ❖ parents experiences with helping services and professionals are more one of control than support
- ❖ to get contact, you need a different approach from that of being seen as yet another helping professional



## MAKING CONTACT

- ❖ be sensitive and humble
- ❖ be honest, open minded and transparent
- ❖ tragic but true: you do not have to make much effort to surprise parents with gentleness

# KEEPING CONTACT

## **parents should be allowed to take the lead:**

- ❖ use their communication channels
- ❖ accept their ideas on contact
- ❖ accept their rules and decisions (even if they stop the contact)

## **the contact person should:**

- ❖ be friendly and charming, be clear, speak in a simple way
- ❖ listen to their narrative and tell them what you notice about it
- ❖ tell them how important it is for you to be in contact with them

# CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCHERS

- ❖ take parents as they are and as they come
- ❖ if you are not able to accept them as they are, let colleagues work with them
- ❖ be aware of personal prejudices: looking different, different behaviour, manners and style of parenting
- ❖ parents need to be sure that there will be no resulting defamation/vilification

## **Success depends on the following:**

- ❖ accept viability, provide validation and appreciation
- ❖ avoid: degradation, embarrassment, reproaches, disadvantage, frustration

## 2. HAVING GOT BIRTH PARENTS INVOLVED

- ❖ What did they say about the experience of having their child in care?

# I: TRANSPARENT CLARIFICATION FOR BIRTH PARENTS OF THE CARE SITUATION

Mother:

When it was decided that my son should go to a foster family, I refused to sign the agreement. After a while I relented and signed it because by doing so I was able to retain custody and specify his residence. But I stressed that I did not want my son to end up in the wrong hands, but to go to my parents. The social worker has always said that the arrangement is open ended and at any time plans for return can be checked. After about a year, she told me that it was now too late for a return to happen. She probably saw me as something of an exception because the foster parents are my own parents. But, at first I was very confused and thought: „Wait, I was never informed about all of this, especially as I believe information of this kind is normally provided quite clearly at the beginning of the care episode.





## II: PARTICIPATION OF PARENTS

Mother:

At the last contact visit, I suddenly noticed that my daughter's hair is now much shorter. She had beautiful long hair. I think that's bad.

And then the foster mother always dresses her in boy's clothes. After going to the playground she is totally dirty. I've given her a pretty dress for girls, but so far she has never worn it.

### III: ATTITUDES TOWARDS BIRTH PARENTS

Mother:

I will continue to work with the youth welfare office because I want my son to come home. I know what I have to do and I will definitely do it for the sake of my son. They have obtained an expert opinion about me. It checked whether I can perform my household tasks and so on. Nothing negative found so everybody is optimistic about the future. The social workers have been understanding and patient. But they also spoke very plainly to me. They require that I have to protect my child in the future, and for that I have to go to therapy.

## IV: SUPPORT FOR BIRTH PARENTS THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE CARE PROCESS

Mother:

When they took him away, I thought I would go mad. Although I kept a cool head and packed everything that was necessary. I'll never forget that terrible moment. For me, the drama began after they took him because I did not know what to do with my life. That is sad enough but at that time I had no life without my children. So I started to drink and freak out. I just wanted to numb my feelings.

What was totally wrong, because during this period they were checking my competence and ability as a mother. And of course, they noted that I was drinking. Then one thing followed another. I really wanted to get help but everything was likely to get worse. And all this was happening at a time when they were figuring out what was best for my son. The pressure is enormous, nothing is okay. At the worst time of your life, you are being evaluated. How do you manage that?

## **V: THE QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BIRTH PARENTS AND FOSTER PARENTS IS A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR AFFECTING THE SUCCESS OF PLACEMENTS**

Father:

At first I was sceptical. The foster father staying at home and letting his wife go out to work. What sort of a man does that? But then we got to know each other and everything changed. An informal meeting at the welfare office helped. He trains a children's football team. And I've played football for 15 years. We both like football. That fits.

# SUMMARY ABOUT THE PERSPECTIVES OF BIRTH PARENTS

- ❖ What kind of support is foster care (for me), if nobody bothers about me and my wishes?
- ❖ Why is it so difficult for helping professionals to work with us (and not against us) when our child lives in another family?
- ❖ Who cares about my development and what happens when I comply?
- ❖ Why do we as well as the foster carers get such mixed messages about the length of the support? What is the meaning of „long-term“?
- ❖ Who is my contact person at the social services?
- ❖ What is my parenting role if my child is living in foster care?
- ❖ How can I participate in the process?

# IDEAS: HOW TO WORK WITH BIRTH PARENTS?

- ❖ Recognise the potential of birth parents and understand this as an important opportunity for developing conditions auspicious for growing children and adolescents
- ❖ Involve an ambulant family social worker before starting a return process
- ❖ Involve parents early to clarify their perspectives and tell them how the support system works and how they can participate in way that helps the child
- ❖ Make sure that parents have a reachable contact person
- ❖ Conflicting positions need moderation and transparent and honest communication
- ❖ Even if it is difficult, the aim is to work with two families in order to get them to work together in the best interest of the child
- ❖ Develop more varied types of foster families in addition to the traditional foster family model which may be becoming increasingly unsustainable

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

Optional: *What do you think?*  
*Is it necessary to involve parents in theory and practice?*  
*What do we have to do?*

Contact: [dirk.schaefer@uni-siegen.de](mailto:dirk.schaefer@uni-siegen.de)