

April Dinwoodie: Welcome to the NTDC Right Time podcast, foster care as a means to support families. I'm your host April Dinwoodie. This podcast works in conjunction with the classroom based training, providing an introduction to the material that will be covered in the classroom on foster care as a means to support families. The podcast will also be a resource for parents to go back to as children in their home transition through different developmental stages. In this episode, we welcome Robbin Pineda. Robbin has been a foster and adoptive parent for over 20 years and successfully maintains relationships with birth families and assisted in reunifications, including providing childcare services after reunification. Welcome Robbin.

Robbin: Thank you. It's great to be here.

April Dinwoodie: I'm so encouraged that we're going to talk about how those that are fostering can support parents and build important connections and relationships. What are some strategies that you have used in doing this?

Robbin: We try to respect the parents as much as possible, despite whatever life circumstances they're going through at the time. We understand they're still the parents. We ask them questions and advice about their children. We, especially during the first few visits, try to have the child interact with their parent as much as possible, and specifically refer to them as mom or dad. Ask mommy is it okay if you do this. Ask daddy can he help you with that. Try to include them as much as possible and let them know that you're not trying to take their place.

April Dinwoodie: Can you talk a little bit more about the positive impacts of this important relationship building?

Robbin: Basically, there's a wonderful impact for the parent because they feel respected and not demeaned or belittled, and I think that it's wonderful for the children to understand that the parents and the people and adults in their lives are working together for their good, and that has to be a positive impact for a child.

April Dinwoodie: Thanks so much, Robbin. It's so simple, yet so impactful and so important for both of children and the parents. Now what strategies have you used to assure parents that you are indeed a partner and a resource for them?

Robbin: Well, I try to include them as much as possible in everything that's going on in their child's life because I bring them report cards. I actually a lot of times bring them samples of the child's work. If it's on a school night that they're having a visit, I have the child bring their homework so their parents can help them with it. If it's possible at all, if there's any type of activities at the school that the child participates in, we try to have the parents attend as well.

Robbin: Sometimes they have the 'Donuts for Dad' day or 'Muffins for Mom'. Whatever type of little activities that the child participates in, we try to have the parent attend as well. We have had parents come to doctor appointments with us,

we've had children who've had surgeries whose parents are there the whole time. When we have church activities and the children are participating in a little play or any type of activity, if at all possible we have the parent attend with us.

April Dinwoodie: This is such a healthy approach. As you go about meeting the needs of the child, you're actually showing the parents that they're also welcome and they're an important part of the team, right? So what are some other ways that you have integrated parents into a child's life to ensure that that relationship is maintained?

Robbin: Depending on the parent and the situation. There's a lot of times that we will text the parents throughout the week in between visits, letting them know maybe something cute that their child said or did, or take a little picture of them enjoying an activity. We try to include them as much as possible in our everyday lives and have the parents over for dinner. We've had parents for Thanksgiving dinner, on Christmas morning come to the house to watch their child open gifts. We've taken parents along with us trick or treating. We invite them for birthday parties or bring a birthday cake to the visit. We have the child make a birthday card for their parents or get their parents something for Mother's Day or Father's Day, and just include them in all the special occasions, as well as the day to day activities as much as possible.

April Dinwoodie: One thing to consider, and I think is something important related to this is how do you incorporate different ways that folks might celebrate? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Robbin: Well, we just try to be respectful of people and their beliefs. Of course, if the parents don't want their child celebrating, we would try to find an alternative activity for the family to participate in. So far we haven't had any difficulties in that, the parents are usually happy to have their child participate in any type of activities that happen, but we would certainly be respectful and cautious if somebody had religious restrictions or other oppositions to things that we do. We would definitely take that into account.

April Dinwoodie: Well, that's so important to recognize those cultural differences that may be there and to honor them and to ask questions, so thank you for sharing a little bit there. Now I'd like to ask you what are some of the things that parents may face that might make it difficult for them to actually care for their children? And how does some of these challenges impact the quality and consistency of their involvement with their children?

Robbin: The issues that resulted in the placement originally are usually the same thing that continue to challenge them while the child is in care. So if the child was brought into care because the parent had drug or alcohol issues, mental health issues, domestic violence, those issues are the same exact ones that impact the visits, the consistency of the visits, the quality of the visits. So that is the main

hindrance that we've seen on having successful visits is parents ongoing struggles.

April Dinwoodie: Thanks, Robbin. That's certainly makes so much sense. Can these things also impact the relationship with you as the foster parent?

Robbin: Yes. Yes, they can. Absolutely. I'm only human, foster parents are only human, and it can be very frustrating when it seems very straightforward to you, who's not struggling with an addiction or a domestic violence issue, or whatever, that you just need to do this one or two things and you can positively impact your life and your child's life, and the parent doesn't do it and they continuously fall back into those old habits and patterns. It's very frustrating. Everybody makes mistakes. If we had those same life experiences, if we were given the same tools that the birth parent has, it would be very easy for us to make those same mistakes. We don't know what they've been through, we haven't walked in their shoes, and it's impossible to judge someone else without knowing their full and entire story.

April Dinwoodie: That's so true, and I definitely feel similarly. Now can you describe co-parenting and share some strategies that parents who are fostering can utilize?

Robbin: Co-parenting in a foster situation is by nature an imbalanced relationship. As the foster parent, you have to recognize that imbalance and try to empower the parent and advocate for them and support them whenever possible, wherever possible.

April Dinwoodie: So Robbin, thank you so much. This idea of co-parenting is so very important, and can you share an example of a situation in which you successfully co-parented?

Robbin: There have been many instances where we've co-parented, especially with the older children, the teenagers, a lot of times we will go to the parent and ask them how do they handle this type of situation? What is their take on this? What is their values on this situation? Because they've been the parent for this child and we have to respect what they want to impart on the child as well. So when it comes to texting or dating or driving, things like that, we try to take into account what the parents' thoughts and preferences are and try to work that into something that also works with our family.

April Dinwoodie: Robbin, this is so great. So Robbin, what are some essential pieces of advice that you would give to those that are fostering to help them truly support the primary goal of foster care to safely reunite children with their parents?

Robbin: You have to be a support for the parent as well as the child. It doesn't mean that you have to support what they do, but you have to support their position in their child's life as a parent. You need to defer to them when you can. You need

to ask their advice whenever possible. You need to respect their opinions and the work that they've put into this child so far.

Robbin: I do think it's important to remember that the parents love their children. Many of these parents have had bad childhoods themselves and they don't do better because they don't know better. Everybody makes mistakes, and if we had those same life experiences, if we were given the same tools that the birth parent has, it would be easy for us to make those same mistakes as well. So I just try to empower them, give them tools, and help them become better parents.

April Dinwoodie: Thank you so much, Robbin.

Robbin: Thank you for having me. I enjoy sharing my experiences.

April Dinwoodie: When approached with as much compassion as possible, those that are fostering and/or adopting can nurture children as well as maintain the important connections and relationships with their parents. The NTDC was funded by the Children's Bureau Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department Health and Human Services under grant number 90CO1132. The contents of this podcast are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children's Bureau.