

April: Welcome to the NTDC Right-Time podcast, Maintaining Children's Connections. I'm your host April [inaudible 00:00:19]. The National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster/Adoptive Parents, or NTDC, is a five-year cooperative agreement from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families' Children's Bureau. This podcast works in conjunction with the classroom-based training, providing an introduction to the material that will be covered in the classroom on maintaining children's connections. 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 internationally known educator, presenter, and author Sharon Kaplan Rozia. Sharon has devoted over 50 years of her professional career to foster care and adoption. Welcome to the podcast, Sharon. I am so excited to have this conversation about maintaining connections. It's a topic that's so important and very close to my heart.

Sharon: And I am very happy to be having this conversation with you, April. It's really great to be with you and to have an opportunity to talk about this very important subject.

April: Let's jump right in. Why is it important to maintain a child's connection with their parents, siblings, and other relatives?

Sharon: Maintaining contact and connection with the child's family sends a clear message to the child that wherever he or she came from is important and should be respected and treasured. Otherwise, how else will they treasure themselves? A child's family is a critical part of who they are and the connections do not go away just because they're not living with them. Even children who have experienced very traumatic things at the hands of their families still have a deep connection to them. As a result, it is critical for the parent who is fostering or adopting to recognize this connection and help facilitate that ongoing connection.

April: So, Sharon, this is all like baseline stuff. These are the basic things, but they're so, so, so important. Can you give some examples of a child who has been able to maintain the connection to his or her family and how that impacted their life?

Sharon: Well, I have two examples. One was from a young child who was with a single parent. She was being adopted, and her older sibling was living with her family of origin. And when she came home from a visit there one day, she said to her adoptive mother, when I'm with my sister, I feel like I have a whole heart filled up. When I'm away from them, even though I love you and I feel safe here, only half of my heart is full. And that really struck me as that connection fulfilling who she was and her identity.

The other example I have really is from a young man I've known since, before he was born. He is now 25, and he has maintained an ongoing relationship with all of his siblings. And he was placed, and then a year later a child from that family was placed. And he has three older siblings that were raised with his birth mother and birth father. He says that without knowing his siblings, he wouldn't know who he was. They're all really big guys like he is, and he's with an adoptive family that's tiny. He feels normal when he's with his birth family. And also he struggles with some of the same mental health issues as his siblings, and it makes him feel like he's not alone in his struggles. So

in both examples, that sense of being all of who you are and having your mirror images around can be fulfilling of one's identity.

April: Thanks so much, Sharon. I think those examples are really important and powerful, and they help people really visualize and feel the importance of these connections. So let's talk about some of the practical elements for maintaining these connections. Can you share your thoughts on that?

Sharon: Oh, absolutely. You know, April, the child's parents and the extended family members have crucial information about the child that can help the adoptive or foster parents better care for the child medically, educationally, physically, even emotionally. Knowing as much about the child's family history will help the parent who is fostering or adopting to adapt their parenting style to better meet the child's needs. For foster parents, maintaining the connections in anticipation of possible reunification becomes important. Over half the children who enter care, do reunify with their families. As a result, it is critical that the communication and connection remain open, even though the child is not living with their parents. Between the parents and the fostering parents, there needs to be a bridge maintained over which that child can cross back and forth. The parents have to know what's going on in the child's life at school, physically, any illnesses, any emotional changes that are going on, maybe because of therapy.

For that child to reenter, for a space to be open in that family that they'd be returning to that information becomes bridge over which that child goes home. If there is a cutoff between the parents and the fostering parents, that child steps back into a home that knows very little about what's been happening in that child's life. And consequently, the child goes back to the same experiences they had before they left. An example of why this is important to stay connected while a child is in placement is that the child is changing and the family is changing, and a bridge needs to be main between those two families for that child to go home comfortably. If the family is not aware of what's going on at the child's school, in therapy, what the rituals and routines are in the foster home, that child can come back to a family totally unable to reintegrate the child into the family again. So it is important that they share on a regular basis the child's day-to-day life.

Even if the child does not reunify with his or her parent, it ensures that there is a connection between the child and his or her family, which will only help the child with future connections and attachments. People are not interchangeable cogs in a wheel. We don't replace one mother for another or one father for another. It's important that we not set up dual loyalty issues in our children, that they feel they can love everyone and not have to choose between the important connections in their life past, present, or future. By supporting connections, the child gets the message that they do not have to choose between the different people they care for and that all important connections are valuable to them.

April: It's so important to get ahead of that and to really share with folks listening that this is real and important and that there are things that you can do to help foster these connections, and it's part of what people need to be in service to. So with that in mind,

Sharon, from your standpoint, who do you think defines who is part of a child's extended family? And what are some of the ways to accomplish this extension of family?

Sharon: Well, one of the very easiest things to do is to simply ask the child who's important to them. It may actually be surprising to the adults around them. Sometimes it is relatives that are genetically connected, and sometimes it's other folks who have cared for them or been a safe haven for them. Of course, this can depend on the age of the child, but oftentimes they are the best people to ask first. One thing to remember is that, not unlike all of us, they may consider close family, friends as their extended family members. I know I grew up thinking that a lot of my aunts and uncles were genetically connected, but they were good friends of my parents, and they played that role. You can also ask former foster parents, social workers, therapists, as well as others who've been a part of this child's journey.

Peers are a really important connecting, ongoing attachment for children. And sometimes we need to know who their friends are that are important that they stay connected to. Helping the child connect with relatives that can be reached, can be invaluable for the child. For those as extended family members who are deceased or cannot be reached, we can still help a child stay connected with important memories by creating ways of remembering and honoring the importance of the relationship through rituals, such as remembering lost loved ones on birthdays and other holidays, having pictures of them, for some children, literally having a little altar where they can put things that remind them of the folks that are no longer with them in their life.

Maintaining connections can be difficult for children to navigate on their own, so it's important that the parent who is fostering or adopting values these relationships as well and helps the child make these connections and strengthen the relationships. This may need to be provided with letter writing, access to phone, access to Skype, exchanging cards in the mail. All of those things can be ways of staying connected.

April: Will you provide a few more detailed examples of what you mean by this so that people can try to incorporate this into their lives real time?

Sharon: Well, what's important to remember is that we're teaching children skills that they can use with their future relationships, that people aren't disposable, that people can be different from you and still play a valuable role in your life. And one of the things I've heard regularly is how different some families of origin might be from the adoptive or foster parents who are parenting day to day. Children need to know how to fit in different environments because that's what the world is, that's what their future work environments or school environments will be like. It's really okay for people to be different and still be included in each other's lives.

And I'm going to use my own relationship with my grandchildren. And great-grandchildren who came to me through adoption. And their life is very different than mine. They live a Baptist life, I live a Jewish life. They just barely finished high school, I have college master's degrees. They live in a very small, rural environment, and I live in a

large city environment. And yet when we get together, what brings us together are our memories of good times, our shared laughter, our sense of humor, the cooking we do together, the crafts we make together. It's real important to know that there's a lot of ways to bridge differences in people's lives, and that cannot be the reason for breaking connections for our children.

April: Okay, Sharon, so can you share with us your thoughts on how important the bonds of siblings are?

Sharon: Oh, they're so important. The research shows they're so important. Our siblings are typically our longest human relationships, longer than with our parents or sometimes even with our spouses. Our siblings can be our biggest cheerleaders, our fiercest competitors, our role models, and our tormentors. They often have taught us our social skills. They are our family mirrors and, in a sense, can bring our parents back to us after they're gone. And as we physically see ourselves and our siblings, we often make life choices through their examples, as well as our own.

I was recently at a gathering with a birth mother who had given up four different children over time after having raised three children. She brings them all together in very open adoptions over the years. And now they're all young adults. They all look alike. They have very similar ways of talking, expressions on their face, likes and dislikes. And they have said frequently to each other and to me and to their mother that without being together, they would feel like they were cut off from themselves. It's so exciting to be in a room with them and see how they play together as adults, how they laugh, how they tumble over each other in play. Even as adults, they compete, they laugh, they point out their own strengths and deficits to each other. They complete each other. I can't imagine, for myself, not knowing my siblings. They're very different from me, and they're very like me. And they make me feel grounded in the world now that my parents are gone.

April: So, Sharon, I can identify so much with this as I'm in reunion with siblings and other family members on my birth mother's side. I think would be helpful for us to understand why this is true for sibling bonds, sometimes even when it's complicated and siblings may not seem to be getting along. What are your thoughts here?

Sharon: Healing sibling relationships can be part of the overall healing for the family. We can't ignore trauma from our past if we want to be healthy in our present moving forward. Can also allow for each sibling to move forward in life, building healthy relationships with future partners and their own children. If these issues are not addressed, it carries into the next generation, and what a loss that would be.

April: I couldn't agree more, Sharon. It would be such a loss. And there are ways to do this, right, even when there's complexity. And healthy relationships with individuals are so much a big part of our existence. What are some ways that we can accomplish keeping a child connected to their culture and their community?

Sharon: Well, in order for a child to build a healthy identity, they must feel and see themselves reflected by their past, as well as their present. These become their mirror images, their community images, their cultural images, their racial images. The truth of their origins cements, a healthy sense of self, allowing for deep attachments to occur. When two people marry, they don't flip a coin to see which culture and community they will keep. In the best of circumstances, they find a way to blend both. This is true in foster care and adoption. In foster care, it's a spent actually important to maintain connections to facilitate reunification. Adoption is like a marriage, and so the same need exists. In a marriage, the family must expand its boundaries to be inclusive of the ethnicity, culture, race, and community that the child brings with them, even if the child placed at birth. In other words, it is not just about the child changing to fit into the family's culture. It is the family changing to integrate the child's culture.

April: Right. And sometimes what better way to do that than through the connections that they have with their parents, right, and their family members and siblings.

Sharon: Absolutely. Because then we are absolutely marrying, if you will, that other culture. It becomes a part of us. We learn their recipes. We learn their songs. We learn their rituals at the holidays. We become an integrated family in a much larger sense of the word. That's the beauty of adoption, I think. It's about adapting. It's about including. It's about expanding. People who choose to adopt or become part of the foster family systems really have a tremendous opportunity to change their whole community, their whole family, the whole world by expanding their boundaries in this fashion.

April: Sharon, I actually think that this is the perfect place to close the podcast. I mean, I think you said it so beautifully, that these connections are so meaningful and they ripple beyond the family system. Right? I certainly feel enriched by having this conversation with you, and I know that everyone who is listening will feel the same way. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and for all let you do.

Sharon: Thank you. I appreciate everything you do too, April.

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