

April Dinwoodie: Welcome to the NTDC Right Time Podcast, Reunification – the Primary Permanency Planning Goal. 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 reunification, the primary permanency planning goal. The podcast will also be a resource for parents to go back to as children and their home transition through different developmental stages. In this episode, we welcome Alice White, social work supervisor for Family and Children Services of Monterey County, with over 23 years of experience in child welfare. She is a training supervisor and has also worked for Hartnell Community College for over 22 years, as a trainer for caregivers who are fostering or adopting children from the child welfare system. Welcome to the podcast, Alice.

Alice White: Thank you, April. It's great to be with you.

April Dinwoodie: Before we talk in detail, I think we should establish a very basic understanding of what we mean when we use the word permanency. Permanency is the basic need for every child to have a permanent family to grow up in and to belong to throughout life with at least one adult who is committed to them.

Alice White: That is correct, April. And our hope is that children can achieve permanency by going home to their family whenever it is possible. In fact, the primary goal for most of the children entering the child welfare system is reunification. Approximately half of the children who enter the child welfare system will be reunited with their family. The role of the child welfare system and of parents who are fostering is to not only provide a safe, loving, and nurturing home for the child, but to support the parents and having their children returned to their care.

April Dinwoodie: So Alice, when we talk about returning children to their parents in the child welfare system, this is referred to as reunification. Can you explain how reunification plays out in the life of a child?

Alice White: It is probably important to note that when children are brought into care, the children are considered to be in out of home care or foster care. This can be with a relative, a near kin. And a near kin is someone who knows the child or the family but is not related to them through blood. For example, a godparent teachers, coaches, neighbors, childcare providers, et cetera, or a recruited foster family home, or a group home. Upon having their children enter care, the parents will receive a case plan that lays out the tasks that they must do in order for their children to return home. This could include things such as counseling, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence interventions, and parent education classes.

Parents also have a right to visit and maintain contact with their children. Parents who have continued contact with their children and participate in their children's lives are more likely to achieve reunification when parents complete

their case plan and they visit regularly with their children and show progress in reducing the risk that brought the children into care, the court can then decide to reunify the children with their parents. The goal of the system is to try and reunify children as quickly as possible, of course, with safety being paramount in this decision. The child welfare system does not want children to remain in out of home care.

April Dinwoodie: Oh, thank you so much, Alice. Now, can you provide some concrete examples of things a parent who is fostering can do to support a child being reunified with his or her parents.

Alice White: As I mentioned before, visitations are a critical component to reunification. Parents who are fostering need to support these visitations and ensure that the children are maintaining consistent contact with their parents. An example of something that caregivers can do is just being the one that provides the transportation to and from the visits, because this gives you an opportunity to interact with the birth parent and to let them know how that child's week went or to ask them questions. And secondly, developing a relationship with a parent is very important. Oftentimes, parents have experienced trauma, separation loss in their past, which impacts their ability to parent. Providing the parent with encouragement, modeling good parenting skills, and making the parents feel comfortable can go a long way. And lastly, involve the parents and parenting. Keep them informed of the child's progress in school, childcare, and sports. Check with the case manager of that particular child's case to see if your parents can accompany you to doctor's appointments, school events, or sporting events. So the more they continue to play a role in their children's lives, the more likely they will stay hopeful and focused on reunification.

April Dinwoodie: This is so helpful, Alice. What are some of the other practical strategies parents who are fostering can use to support reunification?

Alice White: Yes, April. Here are a few. Remember, respect and non-judgment is the starting place when working with birth parents. When the parent who is fostering initially is meeting the parent, it is important to remember this meeting may set the tone for how they will interact from then on. So it's important for the parent who is fostering to make the effort to meet the parent and help them fill at ease. It's really important to come in and be respectful.

Ask questions to the parent about how they want to be addressed. Do you want to go by your first name or your first and your last name? Do you have a nickname that you get called? All this helps you interact and get engaged with that parent from the very beginning. If the parent has a supportive relationship with a parent who is fostering, it can have a huge impact on their ability to unify with their children, not to mention the benefits this has for the children. And I really can't stress enough how important it is for the children that are in your care to see the caregivers and the parents have healthy, respectful interactions.

It is important that parents who are fostering understand that parents love their children, and more often than not, want them to be safe and happy.

April Dinwoodie: Thanks so much, Alice. All of that is so helpful. Recognizing that sometimes visitation can be awkward, what are some of the practical things that parents who are fostering can do to make this less awkward?

Alice White: Okay. April, let's start with the importance for the parent who is fostering to actively participate in visitation with the parents. The parent who is fostering can use this as a time to model good parenting practices, such as bringing one of the children's favorite activities and encouraging the parent to do it with the child. You can do things like bringing the homework assignment or an activity that they have to do and providing it to the parents so that they can do it with the child during that visitation. Preparing for visits is necessary and parents who are fostering can meet with a case worker in advance of the visitation to discuss ideas of some practical, age appropriate questions and good conversation starters.

Parents always appreciate being asked about their children, such as their bedtime routine, favorite foods, family rituals, things that make them happy, sad, or fearful. What are the children fearful of? Parents who are fostering can bring school projects, such as artwork, pictures that they have taken of the child, or even flowers picked from their garden for the child to give to their parents during the visit. And again, I want to stress how very important it is to take pictures of the child and give it to the parent. It's such an easy way, with our technology nowadays, to be able to do that. And also children make so much artwork in school, and giving it to the parent, you see the joy on their face when they're able to have a part of their child's life when they're not living with them.

April Dinwoodie: Alice, all that you share is just such important information and so practical, so thank you so much. Now, I've heard that some parents who are fostering can complain about the child's behavior getting worse right before or after visitation. Can you explain some of the reasons for this?

Alice White: Yes, I can do that, April. Visitation is awful and difficult for parents who are fostering because children's loss and grief often can play out before and after the visitation. This does not mean that visits went badly or the children do not want to visit the parents, instead, is a way of children showing their grief, a loss, or even confusion and anger about being separated from their parents. And again, I want to stress to you why, again, it's important that caregivers who are fostering provide that transportation to and from visits. Because if the child can talk, you're able to process with them on the way home from that visit, and that really helps that child process that visit and you can normalize it much more, because children do have reactions to visits. And again, like we stressed, it is because of their loss and grief that they've gone through. In my many years of doing visitation with caregivers and children, children really do want to see their

parents and visitation is so important to them. So anyway that caregivers can help with this process for children, it just is so important.

April Dinwoodie: Thank you so much, Alice. I'm so glad you mentioned children wanting to visit their parents and to be in relationship with them even when they have experienced abuse or neglect. Can you talk a little bit more about that specifically?

Alice White: Oh, that's such an important question, April, and it's certainly not without complexity. And most children want to return home to their parents, even if they have experienced abuse and neglect. Although the parents may not have always been able to properly care for the child, the parents almost always have shown love and provided comfort to their children at some point. There is a level of connection that remains between children and their parents, regardless of the situation at hand. In my years at child welfare, children have said things to me that are so profound, like, "Can you just fix what's happening with my mom? Can you make them well again so that I can go home?" And you also have to remember that often, children aren't with their siblings and they all want to be reunited again. So no matter how much we think children fear or hate their parents for abusing or neglecting them, there is often an incredible, strong, loving bond, and children almost always prefer to be back home with their parents.

We also need to remember that some situations, a parent may be trying very hard to do the right thing, but life circumstances and lack of support may have played a big part in what resulted in a neglectful environment for the child. An example is a parent who struggles with a mental health problem and they lose their job. And then they can't afford the needed medication to control their illness, and that results in them not being able to attend a child's needs. We can certainly see how this can happen and feel empathy for the parent and the child.

Lastly, when children are placed in out home care, in addition to not being with their parents, they often lose the connection to their community, their school, and sometimes to their siblings. In essence, they lose everything that feels comfortable and normal to them. If you think about it, it makes total sense that they want to go back to what feels normal and comfortable. I just really want to stress that in my 25 years of doing child welfare, most children want to go home to their parents. They do have a loving relationship and they love their parents, their grandparents, their siblings. They all want to be reunited again.

April Dinwoodie: Alice, I couldn't agree more with everything that you've shared. We could talk about this so much more, but before we close, do you have any final thoughts?

Alice White: There's always so much to discuss, and yes, I do have some final thoughts. Children belong with their families whenever it is possible. Although this may not always be possible, we have to try hard to support the parents and return

the children to their care. Reunification is almost always a primary permanency goal. And although it's a wonderful thing for children to be reunited with their parents, it can be very hard for the parents who are fostering. Parents who are fostering are likely to feel loss and sadness during this time. These are normal feelings, and parents who are fostering should discuss their feelings openly with their case worker and with other parents who are fostering so they can get the support that they need.

That's why it's really important for caregivers who are fostering to join other trainings that have other foster parents there, because you're going to meet folks that have gone through your own experience that you are also doing. And parents who are fostering play a vital role in reunification. They can be role models to the parents, facilitate communication between parents and their children, and sometimes even stay connected with the parents and their children after they have been reunited. We can't do our jobs without caring, loving foster parents, and I cannot stress to you how important your role is in the lives of these children.

April Dinwoodie: Absolutely. Alice, I echo your support and encouragement for parents who are fostering, especially related to this important process of reunification. I can't thank you enough for all of your wisdom and information today. Thank you.

Alice White: Thank you, April. My pleasure.

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