

Session Five

Strengthening Family Relationships

Session Five

Competencies and Objectives

Competencies

Prospective foster parents and adoptive parents:

- Know the importance of promoting a child's positive sense of identity, history, culture, and values to help develop self-esteem.
- Know the value of Lifebooks.
- Understand the importance of respecting children's connections to their birth families, communities or tribal communities, and previous foster families and/or adoptive families.
- Know that regular visits and other types of contact can strengthen relationships between children and their birth families.
- Know the importance of respecting and supporting children's connections to their siblings appropriate to each sibling situation.
- Understand how visits with their family may affect children's feelings and behaviors.
- Know how to prepare children for visits with their families, and how to help them manage their feelings in response to family contacts.
- Know the importance of being non-judgmental in caring for children, working with their families, and collaborating with other members of the team.
- Know the value of maintaining records regarding a child's history.

In-Session Learning Objectives

As a result of their participation in this training program, prospective foster parents and adoptive parents will be able to:

1. Describe the connection between family relationships and the child's self-esteem, personal identity, and cultural identity.

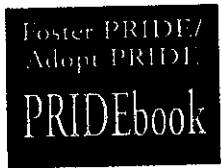
2. Describe the impact of placement on the child's self-esteem, personal identity, and cultural identity.
3. Demonstrate the use of an ecomap to better understand family connections.
4. Identify ways to strengthen connections for children in family foster care.
5. Describe how positive cultural identity develops in a child.
6. Identify age appropriate strategies to promote positive cultural identity.
7. Describe the importance of visits to maintaining the child's connections.
8. Describe the importance of visits to children receiving adoption services and/or children who have been adopted.
9. Describe the difference between visits for reunification and open adoption visits.
10. Identify the components of the visiting plan.
11. Identify ways to help prepare the child for visits.
12. Describe the connection between the child's feelings and behaviors after visits.
13. Identify ways to help the child handle feelings immediately after a visit.
14. Identify three reasons why family continuity is such a challenge for children in foster care or receiving adoption services.
15. Explain the concept of "time traveling," and identify specifically how this can be used to promote family continuity.
16. Explain the use of the Lifebook in promoting family continuity.

At-Home Learning Objectives

Through reviewing, at home, the information in their PRIDEbook, prospective foster parents and adoptive parents will be able to:

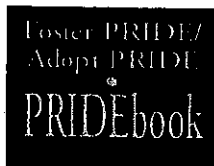
1. Identify examples of parents' rights and responsibilities when their child is in family foster care.

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2. Identify reasons why separating siblings through foster care or adoption adds to their emotional trauma.
 3. Identify issues affecting their ability and willingness to work effectively with birth parents, based on the information in this session's A Birth Parent's Perspective.
 4. Identify specific ways to support a child's safety, permanence, and well-being.



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Session Five

Agenda

Part I: Welcome and Connecting with PRIDE

- A. Welcome and Review of Competencies, Objectives, and Agenda
- B. Making Connections from Session Four
- C. Making Connections with Assessment, Licensing, and Certification

Part II: The Family and Self-Esteem, Personal Identity, and Cultural Identity

- A. The Role of Families
- B. Supporting the Development of Positive Cultural Identity
- C. How the Team Works to Support Family Relationships
- D. The Ecomap as a Tool for Understanding Family Relationships

Part III: Supporting Family Connections and Family Continuity

- A. The Impact of Placement on Connections and Sense of Continuity
- B. Supporting and Maintaining Family Connections
- C. Promoting Family Continuity

Part IV: Closing Remarks

- A. PRIDEbook Resources
- B. A Birth Parent's Perspective
- C. PRIDE Connections
- D. Preview of Session Six
- E. Making a Difference!
- F. End Session

The Development of Racial Identity

Foster PRIDE/
Adopt PRIDE

PRIDEbook

Birth to age 3: Toddlers become aware of physical race and skin color difference and learn names for specific groups. They do not comprehend the real meanings of these labels and may be puzzled by the use of colors to describe people.

Ages 4–6: Preschoolers can usually identify their own racial or ethnic group and may place a positive or negative value on their own and other groups. Feelings about groups are acquired by absorbing societal messages from the media, literature, toys, and their surroundings, even in the absence of contact or parent instruction.

Ages 7–11: Latency age children usually have a firmer understanding of their own racial and ethnic identity and—given the opportunity—will explore what it means to be a member of this group. This can be a prime age for participating in group activities with a cultural or educational focus, as well as a time when role models are especially important.

Ages 12–18: Adolescence is a time of exploration, including determining the significance of race, ethnicity, culture, adoption, and examining how these apply to the individual. A teen's past experiences with his or her ethnic group identity are important, as those experience determines whether his or her identity now is positive, negative, or in transition.

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Resource 5-C

Adapted from Crumbley, J. (1999). Transracial Adoption and Foster Care. Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 3–4.

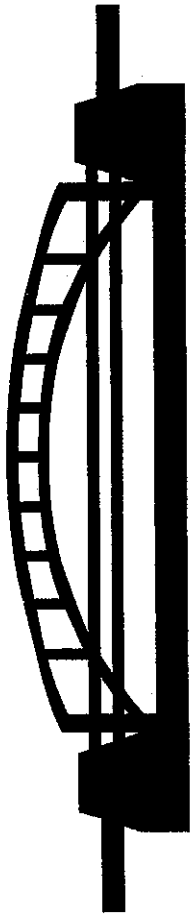
Promoting Positive Racial Identity

To help promote positive racial and cultural identity, caregivers need to communicate important principles, such as the following:

- Members of the child's minority group can and do make positive achievements.
- The child and his or her minority group have the same rights and entitlements as members of the dominant group.
- The child and his or her minority group are as good as any other group.
- Stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are wrong and are based on untruths.
 - Expose the child to historic figures and give information about his or her group's accomplishments, capacities, value, and culture.
 - Redefine and reframe the child's definition of success, strength, and accomplishment by using standards of the child's culture (such as highlighting family commitment, group survival, or spiritual integrity)
 - Expose the child to members of the same minority group who are in positions of power and control

Adapted from Crumbley, J. (1999). Transracial Adoption and Foster Care. Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 3-4.

Bridging the Gap Between Resource Families and Birth Families



BRIDGING THE GAP—A CONTINUUM OF CONTACT

The type of contact that is arranged between resource families and birth families is planned in conjunction with the agency and other members of the child welfare team. The team would consider the type of contact that is in the best interest of the child, as well as ensuring safety for all family members. The continuum includes:

Bridging the Gap Without Direct Contact:

- Send pictures of child to parents; ask for pictures of parent
- Send snack or activity for visit
- Prepare child for visit
- Remember child's family in prayers or through family rituals
- Request cultural info from birth family
- Share Lifebook with family
- Share copies of school papers and report cards with family
- Share child's artwork w/ family
- Exchange letters with child's family via worker
- Speak positively and openly about child's family
- Learn about child's family, community, and culture

Bridging the Gap when there is Contact Between Resource Families and Birth Families:

- Take child to visits and talk positively about the visit
- Talk with parent at visit about child's day to day life
- Encourage parent to phone child and child to phone parent
- Meet child's family at time of placement or prior to placement
- Ask for the parent's advice
- Attend meetings and reviews when parent is present
- Reassure parent of child's love
- Attend training to learn ways to work with the birth parent
- Refer to child as "Your child" when speaking with birth parent
- Share parenting information with parent

Bridging the Gap by Working with Birth Parents as Part of the Service Plan:

- Host visits in your home
- Attend visits in the parent's home
- Support child's transition back to their family
- Involve birth family in visits to doctors, therapists, or school conferences
- Assist in planning child's return to birth family; support family's reunification efforts
- Include birth parents in farewell activities
- Attend training to learn about mentoring a birth parent
- Assist birth parents with transportation to treatment related appointments

Bridging the Gap by Serving as a Mentor to the Birth Family:

- Welcome parents into your home
- Coordinate and discuss discipline efforts together
- Attend parenting classes with parents
- Advocate for needed services for family and provide assistance in obtaining services
- Support and encourage birth family's involvement in treatment
- Provide feedback to birth parents on parenting skills
- Model and teach parenting skills in your home
- Provide respite care for birth parents after child returns home
- Serve as support to birth family after child returns home

As we bridge the gap between resource parents and birth parents, we also bridge the gap between children and their families.

PRIDE Connection

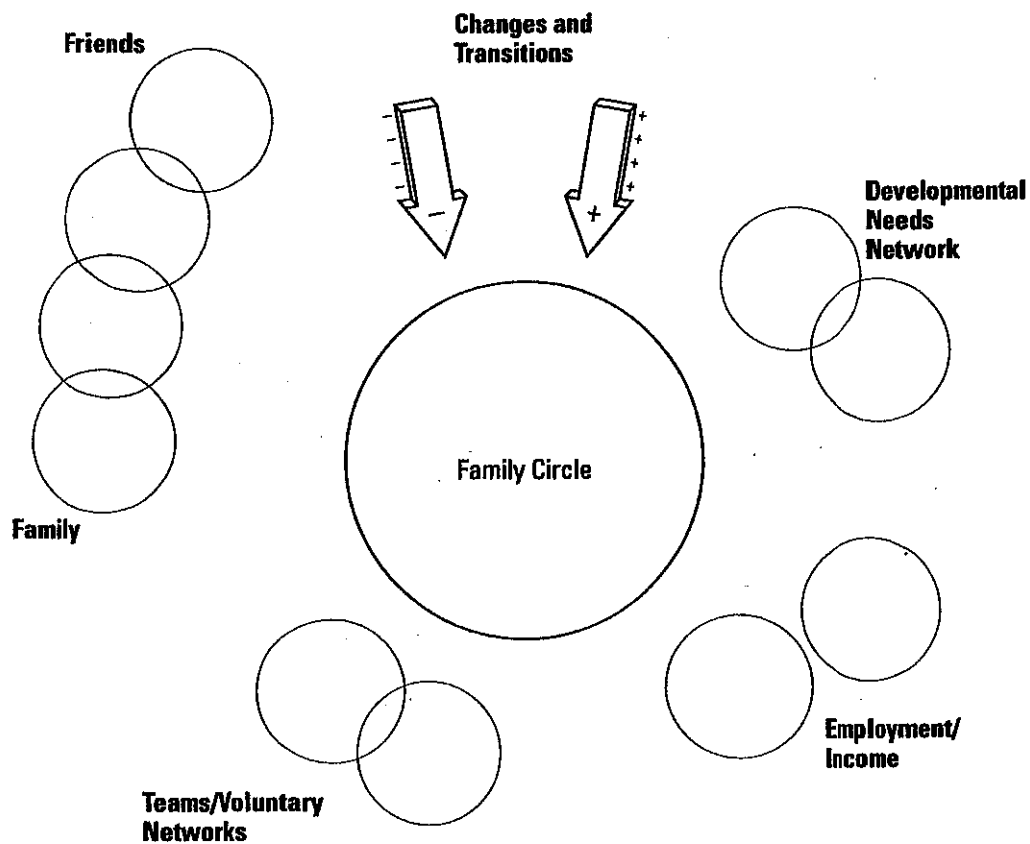
The ecomap is a tool used to create a drawing that represents your family's connections to other individuals and to the community. You can create an ecomap for your family with the following steps:

1. The large circle in the center represents your family. In this circle put smaller circles representing the people who live in your home; then write their names.
2. The circles on the top left represent friends and family. Circles connected by straight lines indicate positive and supportive relationships. Slashed lines represent stressful relationships, and dotted lines are weak relationships.
3. The circles to the right marked "Developmental Needs" represent resources in the community that are essential to your family's well-being and development. You might add medical clinics, schools, day care, or other resources. Indicate by a straight, slashed, or dotted line the nature of the relationship.
4. The next area is marked "Employment." Identify here any financial sources of support or places of employment.
5. The last circles represent voluntary organizations, teams, or clubs in which you participate. This might be church, volunteer work, or organizations to which you and members of your family belong.
6. Review your completed ecomap. What new insights can you learn about your family?

Name: _____

Date: _____

Family Development Specialist: _____

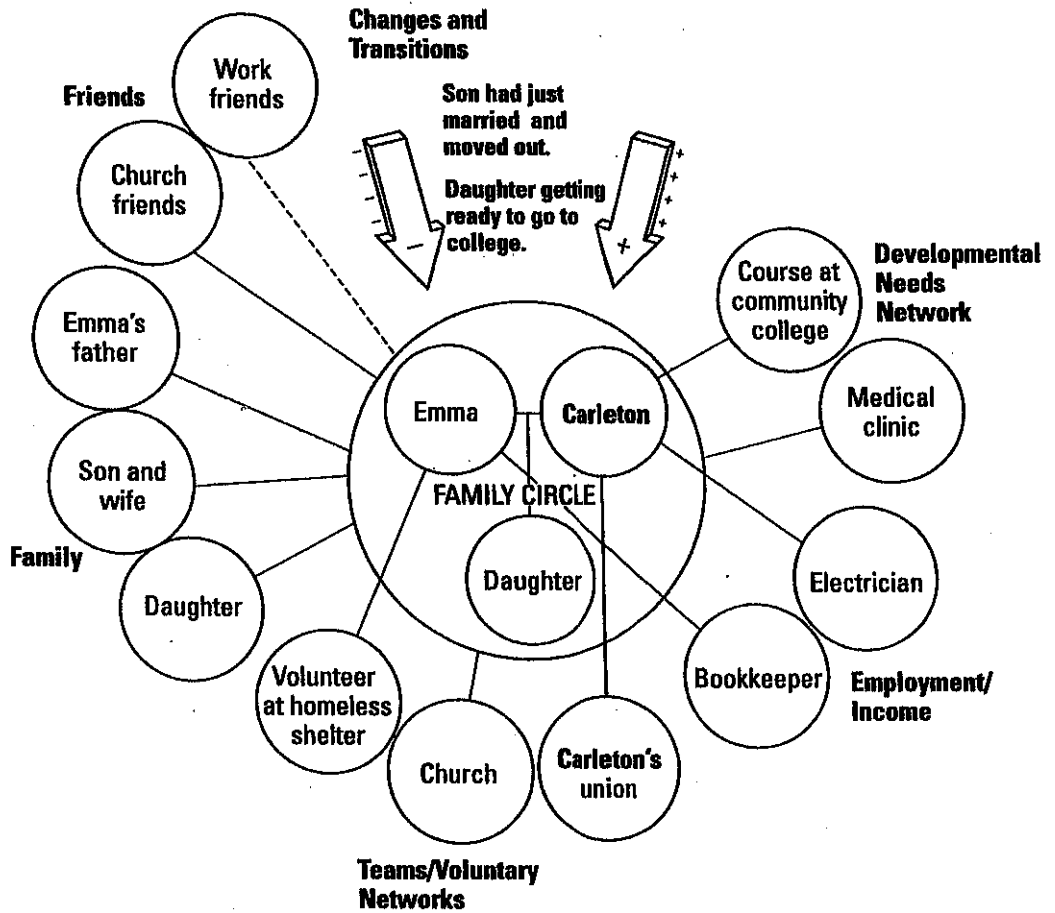


Hanson Family Ecomap

Completed During Their PRIDE Training

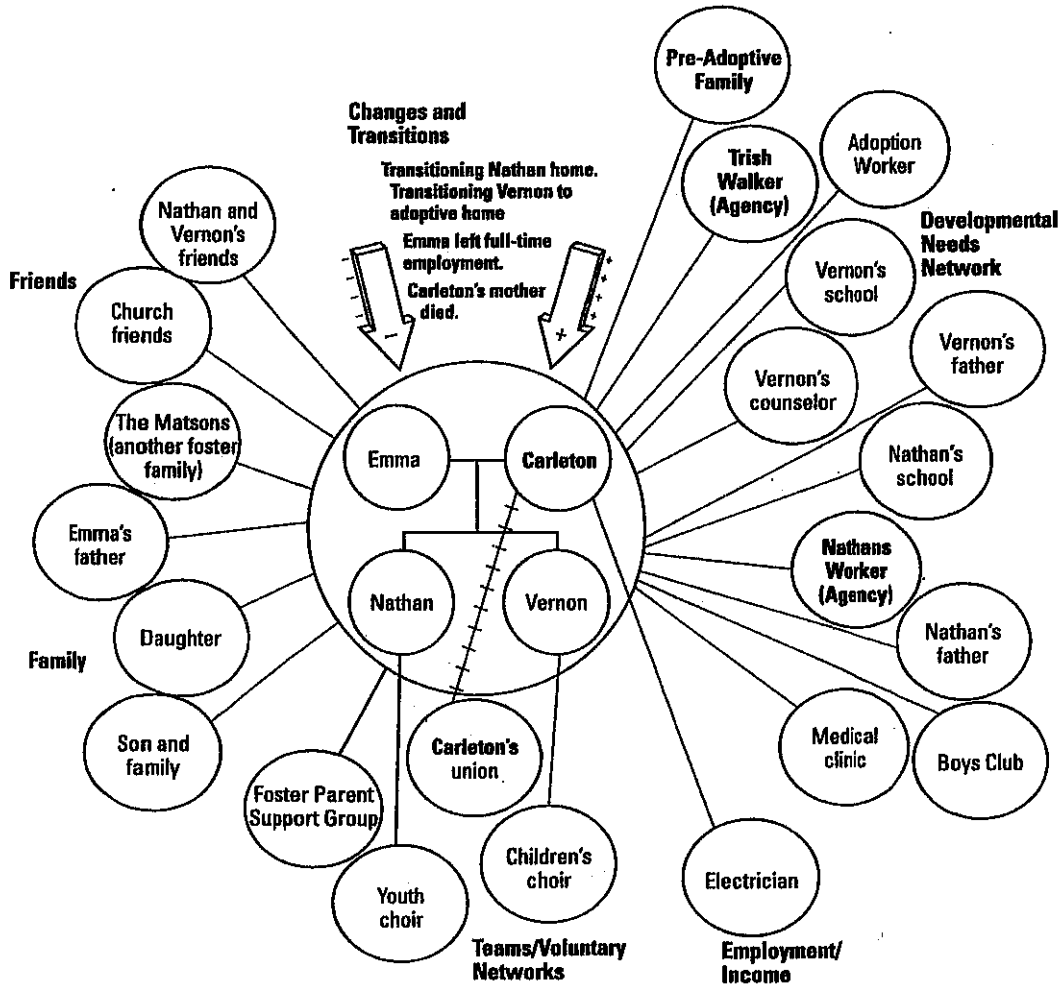
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Hanson Family

Current Ecomap



Will's World

Will is an eight-year-old boy who is being placed in foster care in a suburb 12 miles from the inner city neighborhood where he grew up. Will's mother is an alcoholic. She works as a waitress and the family receives food stamps. Her current boyfriend sexually abused Will. Will has never lived with or met his biological father. For the first five years of his life, Will's mother had a live-in boyfriend, who was close to Will. Occasionally, this man stops by Will's Little League games to watch him play.

Will's grandmother and uncle live in his neighborhood. His grandmother's health is poor. Will's uncle is a former drug addict who has contracted AIDS and is very ill. Before his illness, the uncle played with Will and helped him with his homework. The uncle has distanced himself from Will, because he doesn't want Will to know he is sick. Will sees his grandmother every couple of weeks. She always tells him his uncle would like to see him, but is too busy.

Will and his mother live in a three-family house. Will has been befriended by the elderly couple upstairs. Will's mother depends on him to help with the household. He walks every few days to the local convenience store to buy bread or soda. The convenience store owner has taken a liking to him. He always has a joke or kind word for Will, and gives him bubble gum.

Will has several friends in the neighborhood who are his own age. An older boy, Jim, has taken Will under his wing, and offers him protection from the neighborhood bullies. Will has athletic talent, and his school gym teacher arranged for him to be on the Little League team. Will had a difficult school year due to oppositional behavior. His teacher was frustrated with him and couldn't handle his behaviors. Will saw the adjustment counselor weekly.

Will has been going to the same neighborhood health clinic for the last few years due to frequent ear infections. He knows the receptionist and the nurse practitioner there. Last Christmas they sent Will home with a gift certificate for groceries and a toy doctor's bag.

Planning for Visits

The foster care team must plan and prepare for family visits. The team must consider whether visits are supervised or unsupervised, where the visits will be, how often visits will take place, and how long visits will last.

Visits are generally supervised in the following situations:

- If there is concern for the safety and protection of the child.
- If there is concern that a parent might leave with the child.
- If the parent is unable to manage the child's behavior.
- If termination of parental rights is being pursued (in this case visits must be supervised).
- If the caseworker wishes to observe parent-child interaction in order to assess progress toward the case goal (visits should not be used exclusively for this purpose—use either some visits or part of each visit).
- The child has just been placed and visits are just beginning.
- The court orders supervised visits.
- When parents need help to make the visit succeed. In these instances the worker or foster parent will use the visit to help enhance the parent-child relationship. (This should not be the primary purpose for the visit. If the parents need long-term assistance, a referral for additional family services should be made.)

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Resource 5-J

Location of Visits					
Location	Agency	Foster Home	Parents' Home	Relatives' Home	Neutral Spot (e.g., restaurant)
Advantage	Easy for worker to observe. Controlled situation if needed.	Satisfies parents' curiosity about how child is living. Less disruption in child's life.	Parents and child may feel more comfortable.	Maintains kinship ties; the child may feel comfortable there.	The setting may be less emotionally charged than the parents' home or the foster parents' home.
Disadvantage	Can seem cold or impersonal. Parents and children feel uncomfortable; lacks privacy.	Parents may feel uncomfortable visiting their children in someone else's home.	Problems with housing or housekeeping may not have been resolved. Child may not be adequately protected or supervised by parents.	Parents may feel criticized by family. Occasionally, extended family is not safe for child.	Lack of privacy.

Frequency and Length of Visits

When reunification is the goal, the visiting plan must include longer and more frequent visits over time. The first visit needs to occur as soon after placement as possible (at least within a week). One must consider the concept of “time” through a child’s eyes. Visits need to occur at least weekly, on an ongoing basis, and increase over time. Before a child returns home, there should be extended visits, including overnight stays.

When the case plan calls for terminating parental rights, the department still has a continuing obligation to arrange parent-child visits. These visits would be supervised and occur consistently, but generally, would not increase over time. As termination of parental rights draws near, visits might decrease. It is important to arrange a final visit that coincides with the termination of parental rights (or voluntary surrender) of a child.

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Resource 5-K

Children's Reactions to Visits

How a child might feel inside...

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Resource 5-L

When first separated from parents:	When they first see their parents on a visit:	When they must say goodbye at the end of a visit:	When they return to the foster family:
shock, anger, fear, depression	elation, fear, sadness, anger	fear, sadness, anger, relief, anxiety	sadness, anger, depression, relief, elation

How a child might behave...

Listless, withdrawn, distracted, hostile, aggressive, tearful, inconsolable	Hyperactive, hostile, aggressive, talking too much, not talking at all, cowering, avoiding parent, clinging to parent, clinging to other caregiver, ignoring parent	Crying, angry, hostile to parent, whining, leaving without saying goodbye, clinging	Hyperactive, hostile, aggressive, talking too much, not talking at all, avoiding family members, clinging to family members, crying, not eating, problems with sleeping, bed-wetting, or other regressive behaviors
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What Would You Do If...?

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PRIDEbook

You will see three video vignettes. After each vignette is shown, discuss the following three questions in your small group.

1. Why might the child behave this way or feel this way?
2. How can you handle the immediate situation?
3. What long-term tasks might you identify for the foster care team?

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Resource 5-M

Fifteen-Year-Old Norma

1.

2.

3.

Nine-Year-Old Michele

1.

2.

3.

Four-Year-Old Mike

1.

2.

.....
Ten-Year-Old Charlie

Part A. (Answer Question #2 only)

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2.

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Part B.

1.

2.

3.

Morrison, T. (1994). The Bluest Eye. New York: Alfred Knopf, 46-47.

The Life Story Book

by Vera Fahlberg

Foster PRIDE/
Adopt PRIDE

PRIDEbook

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Resource 5-N

Every individual is entitled to his or her own history.

It is difficult to grow up to be a psychologically-healthy adult without having had to one's own history. Traditionally, the family is the repository of knowledge about the child. Children separated from their families of origin do not have daily access to this source of information about their personal histories. It becomes more difficult for them to develop a strong sense of self and to understand how the past may influence present behaviors. Without this awareness, it will be more difficult for them to make conscious choices and to take responsibility for their own behaviors. For this reason, we believe a Lifebook should be made for each child. It is never too late or too early to make a Lifebook.

The Lifebook is designed to enable the child to understand significant events in the past, confront the feelings that are secondary to these events, and become more fully involved in the future planning of their lives. Frequently, the first step is to learn how he explains himself to himself, and what he understands his situation to be. This means listening for the child's perceptions of these matters. Until we do this, we won't know if we are to expand their information or correct their perceptions. Each time the Lifebook is read, the child is likely to understand the message in a slightly different way, reflecting her current intellectual abilities and psychological needs. The message we are trying to convey is, "You are important. Your thoughts and feelings are important" (Ryan, 1985).

A Lifebook can

- provide a chronology of the child's life;
- enhance self-esteem and identity formation;
- help a child share his history with others;
- assist in resolving separation issues;
- identify connections between past, present, and future;
- facilitate attachment;
- increase trust for adults;
- help the child recognize and resolve strong emotions related to past life events;
- separate reality from fantasy or magical thinking;
- identify positives, as well as negatives, about the family of origin.

What Goes Into A Lifebook?

The Lifebook is an account of the child's life, conveyed through words, pictures, photographs, and documents. Every Lifebook should mention the child's birth mother and birth father. "We have no information about you birth father" at least acknowledges that he exists and that it is acceptable to talk about him.

Children like to have information about their own births, including how much they weighed, how long they were, what day of the week they were born, and at which hospital. A baby picture should be included if one is available. Some hospitals can refer caregivers to the photographer who took the infant photos when the child was born, and a picture may still be available. Health problems or abnormalities observed at birth should be noted as well.

Each book should explain why and how the child entered the adoptive family or the foster care system and how subsequent decisions were made. Many times, adults gloss over the reasons for the child's placement. This avoidance can pose long-term problems. The very fact that adults hesitate to share information about the child's past implies that it is too awful for the youngster to cope with. But whatever occurred in his past, the child has already lived through it and survived. He has already demonstrated his survival skills. Facts can be presented in ways that help the child understand and accept his past while raising self-esteem, or that lower feelings of self-worth. With experience, adults can learn to reframe even negative life experiences as positive strivings that went astray. Information should be presented in words the child understands.

Photographs of birth parents should be included. One-of-a-kind photos should be duplicated before being put in the Lifebook, with a copy put away for safe-keeping. Information about parents and siblings should be gathered as soon as possible. If a Genogram has been completed as part of the assessment of the birth family, a copy should be included.

Most toddlers do some things that upset their parents at the time but that seem humorous in retrospect and become the basis of family stories. Talking about such behaviors give the child a clear indication that he can and will change. Even though it is often true that there are no pictures of these incidents, they usually suggest strong visual images. For example, one child washed her hair in a mud puddle twice in one day, even as her mother tried to get her ready to go to a party. Such behaviors are unique to each child and usually lead to shared laughter when the youngster outgrows that conduct. This concrete evidence of the possibility of change should be included in the Lifebook.

Sources of Information

Birth family members are an obvious source for pictures, mementos, and a variety of other information. The message to the birth parents is that they have something to offer the child even though they will not be parenting him. Requests from the adoptive parents for pictures and information reassures the birth parents of their importance in the child's life. These requests can be made directly or through the agency involved. Information that can be compiled by adoptive or foster parents might include:

- developmental milestones;
- childhood diseases, immunizations, injuries, illnesses, or hospitalization;
- the ways by which the child shows affection;
- the things she does when happy or excited;
- the things that frightened him;
- favorite friends, activities, and toys;
- birthday and religious celebrations;
- trips;
- extended family members who are important to the child;
- cute things the child does;
- nicknames;
- family pets;
- visits with birth relatives;
- names of teachers and schools attended;
- report cards;
- special activities, such as scouting, clubs, or camping experiences
- church and Sunday School experiences;
- pictures of each foster family, their home, and their pets.

How To

There is no right or wrong way to make a Lifebook. Just as each child and her history is unique, so will each Lifebook be one of a kind. Some children like to start at the beginning, with their birth or even before, offering stories about how their birth parents met, for example. Others may do better by starting with the present, talking about current family, school, friends, likes and dislikes. Some even want to start out talking about future plans. There are advantages to each of these approaches.

Loose-leaf photo albums with plastic-protected pages may be used. Some use a book with construction-paper pages. Some adults use prepared books; others make up their own. Some include photocopied or printed pages to be filled in. The particular words used with a Lifebook are often very important. Although many children enjoy the idea of a scrapbook, to the child who may have poor self-esteem, the term “scrap” may have a negative connotation. Therefore, we prefer to avoid the term scrapbook. We also purposefully avoid the term “forever,” which may sound overwhelming to the child. The terms “keeping” or “growing up with” explain equally well the permanency that we are seeking for children and are preferred.

When children resist being an active participant in working on their Lifebook, adults have to become more creative. Trips can be made and photographs taken of places important to the child’s life: an old neighborhood, the hospital where the child was born, or the courthouse where decisions were made on his behalf are examples.

If the adult does not have complete information, as is so often the case, it is still possible to encourage and support emotional exploration. When a child’s statement reveals assumptions, such as “it seems as though my birth mom didn’t love me as much as my sister,” the adult might respond by saying, “That is possible. Some parents have difficulty loving all of their children. I don’t have any information as to whether or not that was true in your case. Can you think of some other reasons it might not have worked out well for you and your parents to live together?” This response allows a hypothetical exploration of a variety of reasons that parents and children have problems living together and expands the young person’s thinking.

Age-Appropriate Uses

- **Under Fours:** Parents may use an adopted child's Lifebook much as they would a baby book. Looking at pictures, talking about the parents' first impressions upon seeing their baby, or talking about initial meetings with birth parents, if that has occurred, all convey that talking about the child's origins and life is pleasurable to the parents.

Relating facts as the child's personal story, as opposed to "reading" it, is more appealing to the very young child. Since young children are likely to be confused by mention of a second mother or father with whom they do not have contact, it is preferable for the adoptive parents of a toddler to refer to the birth parents by their first names. As the child gets older and observes the connection between pregnancy and childbirth, the terms "birth mother" and "birth father" can be added to the story-telling.

- **Four to Seven:** Children of this age understand the concept of "practicing" as a way to learn a new skill. The Lifebook may provide opportunities for the child to "practice" talking about important things, or to practice having fun with parents, or sitting close while reading, etc. Parents are practicing also, so the child should be made to understand that learning to be close involves both children and adults working on it.
- **Eight to Twelve:** The Lifebook may be a means to helping children develop a "cover story" that helps them retain their right to privacy and control over their story. Children need a way to explain to others why they do not live with their birth family. The cover story is a shortened, not-too-revealing version of the truth. Children need to be given permission to refuse politely to provide strangers or mere acquaintances with answers to personal questions. They need to prepare to ask themselves, "Is this someone who really needs the information?" If not, they might say, "I'd rather not talk about it," or "That's very personal information," or to give the Ann Landers response, "Why would you ask a question like that?" Providing the child with opportunities to practice responses ahead of time will help her not to be caught off-guard.
- **Adolescence:** The effects of early childhood traumas or separations become more evident during early adolescence as separation/individuation tasks are recycled. The psychological tasks of early adolescence are very similar to those of years one through five. This repetition is both good news and bad. The bad news is that unmet early needs come back to haunt adolescents in exaggerated form; the good news is that it offers potential to address these earlier needs and meet them more appropriately, thereby facilitating true lifelong change for the young person. Although adults cannot undo difficult early life experiences, they can help the young person develop compensatory skills (Beyer 1990). Adolescents have the capacity for hypothetical thinking. By thinking ahead, they can identify and prepare themselves for the times when the memories of past traumas are most likely

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to resurface. They can start to identify the skills necessary to the development of choices that their birth parents may never have had. They can look more realistically at the choices made by those involved in their lives and be encouraged to take responsibility for the choices they will ultimately make themselves. Adults can help the young person look ahead, identifying times that the feelings of early life experience might echo.

Ricks (1985) observed that individuals who were able to forgive past experiences and/or speak coherently about the events shaping their lives were more likely to have securely-attached children when they themselves become parents. How do we help adolescents come to the point of forgiveness? How do we know if they have achieved it? Information about family patterns, combined with support in making conscious rather than unconscious choices will help young people move forward from the difficulties of their pasts without being judgmental. Triseliotis (1983) has identified three important areas which contribute to identity-building in adolescence. The first is to have a childhood experience of feeling wanted and loved. The second is to have knowledge about one's own personal history and the third is the experience being perceived by others as a worthwhile person. Lifebooks we can contribute significantly at least two of these three goals.

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Key Points

The Family and Self-Esteem, Personal Identity, and Cultural Identity

The Role of Families

Families provide us with our personal identity, an understanding of our culture, and the connections that give us a sense of belonging and permanence. Children who need foster families and adoptive families are often at risk regarding positive self-esteem, personal identity, and cultural identity. Self-esteem is jeopardized through the trauma of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and maltreatment. When the trauma of placement occurs, and children must deal with loss and separation, self-esteem and personal identity are further jeopardized. The foster care team has a responsibility to assist children to develop positive self-esteem, and to help them develop an understanding of who they are. The primary way the team can do this is by supporting family relationships.

Supporting the Development of Positive Cultural Identity

Toni Morrison, in her book *The Bluest Eye*, wrote about a young Black girl who wanted to have blue eyes so she could be as beautiful as all the blond-haired, blue-eyed children at school. She writes:

Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long time. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people.*

A significant part of the way our identity develops has to do with how others see us, react to us, and provide feedback to us. We tend to pick up cues about who we are from other people. We begin to form our sense of who we are from the messages we receive from those who surround us. If others are continually reacting in a negative way to our “not having blue eyes,” then it will be very difficult to see the beauty of any other color. In children, as identity is developing, these messages can be very powerful.

Cultural identity is part of every child’s development. Children develop values, life routines, communication patterns, and religious beliefs, as well as a

* Adapted from Crumbley, J. (1999). *Transracial Adoption and Foster Care*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 3-4.

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taste for certain foods, and a knowledge of how life is celebrated and honored. Cultural identity also includes the development of racial identity. Remember, however, race is only one part of culture. Children may be from the same race, but there may still be differences in their overall cultural identity.

While race is only one aspect of culture, it is an aspect that often challenges us when working with children. Many of you may have wondered, "When do children begin to notice that skin colors differ?" You may wonder when and how it is appropriate to acknowledge differences. This developmental model can be very helpful to you. It applies to all children—regardless of their race—and how they begin to recognize and understand differences.

There are many factors that affect how children proceed through the stages of development, and this is also true with regard to how racial identity develops.* However, we can define necessary tasks within approximate age ranges:

From birth to age three, toddlers become aware of physical race and skin color difference and learn names for specific groups. They do not comprehend the real meanings of these labels and may be puzzled by the use of colors to describe people.

From ages four to six, preschoolers can usually identify their own racial or ethnic group and may place a positive or negative value on their own and other groups. Feelings about groups are acquired by absorbing societal messages from the media, literature, toys, and their surroundings, even in the absence of contact or parent instruction.

From ages 7–11, children usually have a firmer understanding of their own racial and ethnic identity and—given the opportunity—will explore what it means to be a member of this group. This can be a prime age for participating in group activities with a cultural or educational focus, as well as a time when role models are especially important.

From ages 12–18, adolescents do a lot of exploration related to identity, including determining the significance of race, ethnicity, culture, adoption, and examining how these apply to the individual. A teen's past experiences with his or her racial identity are important, as those experience determines whether his or her identity now is positive, negative, or in transition.

How the Team Works to Support Family Relationships

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There are a variety of ways to help support the child's relationships, including:

- Supporting family visits.
- Talking to the child about his or her family.
- Encouraging birth family participation in decision making for the child (such as education, medical treatment, and services).
- Obtaining pictures of the birth family for the child.
- Taking the child back to visit his or her community/church/school.
- Planning for telephone calls and letters.
- Having the child draw pictures/create artwork for the birth family.
- Respecting the possessions given to the child by his or her family.
- Including the birth family in the child's prayers at bedtime.
- Reassuring the child that the birth family cares for him or her despite the difficulties the family has had in meeting the child's needs.
- Being courteous and respectful to the birth family in front of the child.
- Not talking negatively about the birth family in front of or to the child.
- Asking for the birth parents' input or assistance on a parenting issue (such as, types of food the child eats, favorite toys, etc.).

These examples fall into two categories—supporting family connections and promoting continuity. Family connections refers to ways that we help the child maintain contact or continue to preserve the connections to the family, culture, and community. When we talk about family continuity, we are referring to how we help the child understand his or her history, and attachments and losses over time.

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The Ecomap as a Tool to Understand Family Relationships

When we are able to appreciate the importance and meaning of family relationships in our own lives, we can more easily understand their importance for children. As we look at our own families and realize the importance of family connections and family continuity, we are able to:

- better understand the impact our families have on our own identity, and therefore better understand the role that birth families play in a child's life.
- better understand how our experiences with family relationships affect our ability in the five competency categories needed for fostering and adopting.

The genogram and the ecomap are helpful tools for better understanding family connections and family continuity.

Supporting Family Connections and Family Continuity

When we seek to build, heal, or strengthen family connections we:

- Demonstrate unconditional acceptance of the child.
- Show respect for the child's connections.
- Help the child to be more self-accepting.

When we try to break family connections we:

- Send a message that there is something bad about the child.
- Reject the child's family or community, and, in effect, reject the child.
- Show the child that he or she cannot trust his or her new caregivers; they have already failed to meet needs for connection and belonging.

The most significant way for family connections to be supported is through the family visit. Research has consistently shown that visits are the key to reunifying families. If children visit with their parents frequently, they are more likely to return home. This is because the relationship and bond are maintained.

Successful visits:

- Reinforce the child's identity.
- Help the child to know his or her parents are all right.

- Demonstrate to the child that the parents care and love him or her.
- Give the child a sense of hopefulness.
- Help alleviate the child's guilt, and reinforce family strengths and competence.

The team must work together to effectively plan and prepare for visits. Planning must consider whether or not visits will be supervised, where visits will take place, their length, and frequency.

Members of the foster care team need to know that children are going to react to the visits in a way that reflects where they are in the grieving process. While it may be difficult to predict how a child will respond, it is best for everyone to expect some reaction—and to see this as a normal response.

We may want to protect the child from visits, the past, and his or her family. In protecting the child, we also want to protect ourselves—from having to handle the child's behavior after visits, or from the discomfort we feel when we know children are in emotional pain. Yet we cannot protect a child from visits, the past, or the family—these are already a part of the child.

It is our responsibility to help the child manage his or her feelings. These feelings may be particularly intense after a family visit.

Visits are the primary means to support family connections; other steps include:

- Involve parents in planning for and implementing placement.
- Continue to recognize the parents' role in making decisions about the child's life (medical, educational, social).
- Use creative ways of supporting family connections. When parents are not available to a child (illness, death, or emotionally distant) the child can be encouraged to write letters, draw pictures, or make video or audio tapes.
- Provide the child with information about his or her family and culture/community or extended family.
- Provide the child with a picture.
- Simply talk to the child about his or her family.

Adoptive parents may think that the topic of visits is not important to them. But it is important for adoptive families to think about visits too. First of all, the child you adopt has probably experienced visits in the past, even if visits are no longer taking place. These visits will impact how children picture and remember their birth families. But sometimes, even when the child is with an adoptive family, visits may occur in the following situations:

- In some cases, children may not be free for adoption and parents may still have visiting rights. These visits are very important because they provide an opportunity for the child and family to say goodbye. The quality of these visits may greatly impact how the child remembers the birth family and how the child proceeds to attach to the adoptive family.
- It may be in the best interest of children to continue contact with their birth family. This is done through what is called "open adoption." This is often done when children are older and have strong relationships with their families.
- If a child is transitioning from a foster family to an adoptive family, visits with the foster family will promote a sense of continuity for the child.
- If a child is transitioning from kinship care to an adoptive family, visits with the kinship caregivers will promote a sense of continuity for the child.

Promoting Family Continuity

Children in family foster care risk losing family continuity:

- Separation from the birth family, even for a brief time, interrupts the continuity of the relationship.
- Lack of continuity, as well as the problems and needs that led to placement, may prevent the family from transmitting its own family history.
- Placement brings about a new family (or families), and the child must integrate and understand each new experience of family living.

Foster parents and adoptive parents, as part of a professional team, help children make peace with their past. We call it "using the present to deal with the past, to prepare for the future." You can think of it as "time traveling." It's an important role. Some of the things you can do as a foster family or adoptive family to use this concept include talking with the child about past experiences, helping the child understand transitions and changes, taking pictures and recording the child's life events while in your home, helping the child to obtain pictures or meaningful souvenirs, and respecting the child's possessions.

There is also a tool, called the Lifebook, that may assist you in working with children. The Lifebook is a record of the child's past and present.

You Need to Know!

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The Importance of Maintaining Parental Involvement*

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Parental involvement in the foster care process was not emphasized in the past. Instead, parents often:

- Were completely displaced in their children's lives.
- Received almost no attention from social workers.
- Were discouraged, sometimes prohibited, from seeing their children.
- Were given no information about their children's foster family, and, therefore, had no contact with them.
- Became hostile, suspicious, and apathetic.

Resource 5-P

Parent involvement is now a priority in foster care programs. It is recognized that *physical separation alone does not interrupt the powerful parent-child bond*. Parents are seen as:

- Playing a significant role, even when separated from their children.
- Having legal rights and responsibilities.
- Needing to be involved in specific activities.
- Wanting to improve their behavior and take charge whenever possible.
- Activities in which parents can participate include:
 - Making a preplacement visit to a foster family home.
 - Physically caring for their children during visits.
 - Making a family scrapbook or tree with their children.
 - Accompanying their children to medical appointments.

* Adapted from Blumenthal, K. & Weinberg, A. (eds.). (1984). Establishing parent involvement in foster care agencies. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

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- Participating in school conferences.
- Formulating, reviewing, and modifying the service plan.
- Participating on an agency committee composed of parents.
- Attending agency functions for parents and their children.

By involving parents, agencies are able to:

- Maintain and improve parent-child relationships, and promote family cohesiveness, and a sense of identification.
- Enhance parents' overall competence by improving their skills and self-esteem.
- Ensure that parents exercise their rights and responsibilities.
- Facilitate family reunification, when appropriate, in a timely way.
- Identify alternative permanent plans when reunification is not possible. (If an Indian child or children covered by ICWA are being adopted, the tribe, too, will have a voice in the placement, service plan, and any permanency plan.)

Examples of Parents' Rights and Responsibilities

Parents' Rights:

- To be consulted during the pre-placement period about the choice for the specific foster care placement, and to participate in preplacement visits.
- To participate in planning for their children, to help formulate the service plan, and to participate in its review.
- To receive services that help them overcome the conditions that led to placement.
- To visit and communicate with their children in according to the service plan.
- To have the final say in decisions concerning major medical services, education, marriage, or enlisting in the armed services.
- To meet the individuals who care for their children, including the foster family, child care workers, or group home parents.
- To receive reports on their children's health, development, and education.

Parents' Responsibilities:

- To help prepare their children for the foster care placement.
- To cooperate with the social worker in developing the service plan, setting goals while their children are in care, and deciding what will be best for their children's future.
- To address problems that prevent their children from returning home.
- To visit their children at a time and place agreed upon with the social worker and/or the foster parents.
- To discuss their children's care and progress with the social worker.
- To inform the social worker about major changes, such as change of address, telephone number, job, income, marriage, or other living arrangements.

The Importance of the Sibling Bond*

Mental health experts are beginning to recognize the significance and power of the sibling relationship:

- It can be longer lasting and more influential than any other, including those with parents, spouse, or children.
- When severed, the negative consequences can last a lifetime.

Separating siblings adds to their emotional burden and trauma because:

- They have already had to cope with the separation and loss of their parents.
- If they are then separated from their siblings, they must experience the grieving process all over again.
- If they were abused or neglected by their parents, they will often have stronger ties to each other.
- They may have learned very early to depend on and cooperate with each other to cope with their problems.

* Adapted from Hochman, G., Feathers-Acuna, E. & Huston, A. of the National Adoption Center.

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- Sometimes, it is only through their siblings that children have been able to gain any positive self-esteem.
 - Often, they are able to reveal to each other parts of themselves that they cannot share with anyone else.

Research on siblings who have been separated reveals that:

- When children are separated because of sibling rivalry, it teaches them that the way to deal with conflict is to walk away from it, not to work it out.

A Birth Parent's Perspective **"This Is Pretty Tough to Take"**

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Resource 5-Q

It's bad enough that I've lost my kid, but it's even worse that I've got to compete with these super parents for her attention when I go to visit Breanna. Maybe you wouldn't see it that way, but that's how it feels to me. Look, I know Jane Stark, my social worker, told me that we've got to have lots of contact with each other because it will help me learn to be a better parent. And don't think I don't know that I'm not exactly the parent of the year, but man, it feels like they are, and there's no hope for me.

Ted and Sue White are the foster parents' names, nice people, I guess. I do appreciate that they are watching out for Breanna because I really don't have any one else that would. But when Jane Stark picks me up and we go out to that house I just feel so confused. Not knowing what's the right thing to do and knowing everyone is watching me makes it all so hard. It's easier to let them do it, but Breanna looks at me, then she looks at them, she just don't know what to make of it all. I'm sure she thinks I'm just no good, but that's not the whole of it. I really do try, but somehow things always get so screwed up. And it just makes me so mad. It feels like nothing ever goes right. What's so special about the Whites anyway?

Breanna gets upset too, I can tell. She's not really sure how to act with me, cause I'm her momma but she's not with me now. My social worker says I'm still her momma and I should discipline her just like if we were at home, but I'm not feeling real sure of myself in front of all those other people. It's no wonder Breanna don't know what to make of it. Well I guess, neither do I.

Some days it's just hard to get up and get dressed when I know I've got to go there. I really want to see Breanna, but there's all this stuff that gets in the way. Do you know how bad it feels to have to visit your baby in someone else's house? Someone who is caring for her when I can't, someone who is talking to her teachers, and is helping her more than I could. Look, don't think I'm not grateful, 'cause I am. The Whites try hard, I can tell. They ask me what I think and tell me lots of stuff that is going on with her. They try to include me in making decisions about Breanna, like Jane Stark said they would. And that helps. It makes me feel a part of her in a little way, but it will never be like having her home with me. Course I guess my one room can't really be our home either.

Feeling grateful doesn't take away the pain from all of this. I think it just adds to it. I feel sorry if I get mad at the Whites, but it just gets away from me. It's all pretty tough to take. I really want to get it together so Breanna can come back to me, but I wonder if we will ever make it.

PRIDE Connections

The Ecomap

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Resource 5-R

The ecomap is a tool used to create a drawing that represents your family's connections to other individuals and to the community. You can create an ecomap for your family with the following steps:

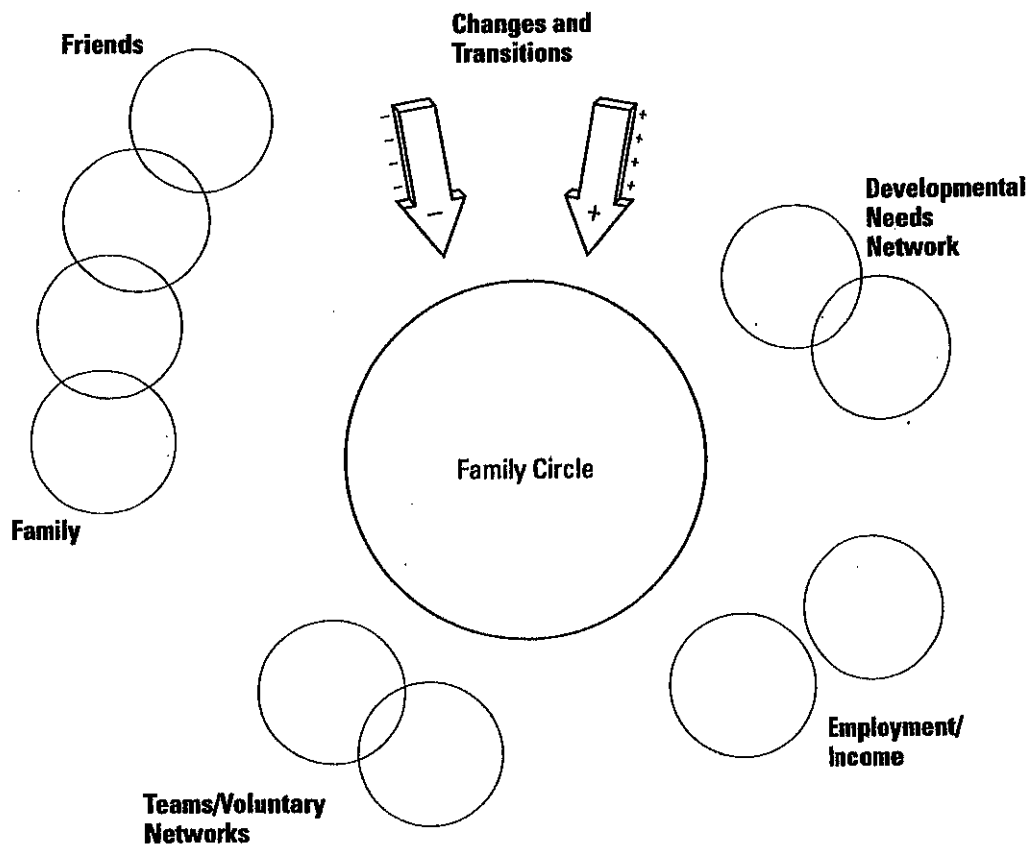
1. The large circle in the center represents your family. In this circle put smaller circles representing the people who live in your home; then write their names.
2. The circles on the top left represent friends and family. Circles connected by straight lines indicate positive and supportive relationships. Slashed lines represent stressful relationships, and dotted lines are weak relationships.
3. The circles to the right marked, "Developmental Needs," represent resources in the community that are essential to your family's well-being and development. You might add medical clinics, schools, day care, or other resources. Indicate by a straight, slashed, or dotted line the nature of the relationship.
4. The next area is marked "Employment." Identify here any sources of support or places of employment.
5. The last circles represent voluntary organizations, teams, or clubs in which you participate. This might be church, volunteer work, or organizations to which you and members of your family belong.
6. Review your completed ecomap. What new insights might you now have about your family?

PRIDE Connections
Ecomap

Name: _____
Date: _____
Family Development Specialist: _____

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Making a Difference!

I began working indirectly with birth parents the first time I became a foster parent. The three siblings placed in our home had a divorced mother who was working very hard to regain custody of her children. I sent notes to her about the children's school progress, special events, and notes of simple encouragement, in which I told her how much her children loved her. I also sent pictures of the children from time to time. I had their picture made as a sibling group, and gave her a 5x7 and wallet-sized photos. When the children went home, we had what we call a "Goodbye Party." We had cookies, cake and ice cream, and other treats. Each person in our home gave an inexpensive gift to the children. Then we sang, "For He's/She's a Jolly Good Fellow/Lady."

Following the return of the children to their home, our family has seen them and visited with them many times. Mom has honked and flagged me down to show me pictures, or tell of special accomplishments. She has expressed her appreciation for my helping her and her children through a very difficult time. This was my very early lesson about how children can be happier with their birth parents, even though their standards of living are much different from mine.

I began making scrapbooks for children placed with me, and when I meet birth parents for the first time, I usually take the book for them to look at and explain that it belongs to their child. I ask them to bring pictures of themselves for the book, as well as other family members. Also, I ask them if they would like to bring a few pictures of the child as a baby to be included in the book. This "scrapbook" has served as an icebreaker many times.

One little boy, whom I'll call Jon, was with me for 2 1/2 years. I visited with his dad, sometimes briefly, and sometimes for longer meetings. When the father began considering relinquishment, I told him that, because he loved his son so much, I knew how difficult that decision must be. I told him that he was to be admired for being so courageous and unselfish for his son's sake. I wrote him a long letter following relinquishment, in which I said that loving means being willing to let go when it's in the best interest of the one you love. I commended him for being one of the few people strong enough to do this for someone else, putting his own feelings last rather than first.

I went to the office for the last visit between Jon and his father. I sat and cried as I listened to Jon's father tell Jon's grandfather about his decision. I was very touched when I heard him using phrases from my letter to express his feelings to his dad. I promised Jon's father that I would continue to remind Jon that his daddy loved him very much, and to tell Jon's adoptive parents the same. Later, when Jon was adopted, I wrote a letter to his birth father and to his grandparents to let them know he now had a permanent home with people who would also love him.

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On another occasion, I wrote notes to, and later met in person, a mother whose son had a behavior problem. We worked out discipline plans, which she followed on visits. Several months later, he returned home. The mother said that his behavior had greatly improved.

I train parents attending Assertiveness Discipline classes. Many times, parents with children in foster care are in these classes. This has improved my insight and understanding of some difficult situations that bring children into foster care. At the same time, these birth parents meet a foster mom who doesn't want to take away their children, and who definitely is not a "perfect parent." It's been good for "attitude adjustments" on both sides of the coin.

One birth father and stepmother of two siblings I fostered were very difficult to work with. I believe the main reason was that they were jealous of the attachments that the children had formed with us after being in our home during the father's two years of imprisonment. Since the children didn't know him, they weren't receptive to the affection he had for them. He and the young woman he married had never parented, so their understanding of a child's normal reactions was limited. I met with them on numerous occasions to discuss child development, emotional problems, behavioral problems, and ways to help the children separate from us and form a trusting relationship with them. They seemed receptive each time, yet they never seemed reassured that I was not interested in keeping the children. This was a frustrating experience for me, and the transition for the children was the hardest I've seen. This could have been made easier with greater cooperation between birth parents and foster parents. I also had a lot of contact with the paternal grandfather, and a good relationship with their paternal aunt, who was very supportive of my efforts.

I have continued contact with a paternal grandmother who gained custody of her grandson. She contacted me for parenting and discipline techniques that worked. We discussed this over dinner several times. Also, several adoptive parents have recontacted me.

I report all birth family contact to my caseworker. I inform any parent who contacts me that I make a report of the contact to their worker for the benefit of all. I believe this is necessary in order to work as a professional team for the best interest of the child.

Eilene Crites
Foster Parent
Oklahoma

