

Tips for Engaging with Fathers

By Diane Behm

I recall the first time we met our third baby. She was tiny, just eight weeks old, and I was learning how to feed her. We sat there together in a hospital room, surrounded by her family. But we were not family, we were the outsiders. We were the in-person proof that their daughter may not be going home with them when she was discharged. The distrust was evident, the fear and anger even more-so.

So many things were going on around us in that room. The nurse hovered nearby, teaching me how to support her chin as she drank her two ounces of formula. I listened to her aunt defensively support her sister. "If she's not going home, she's coming home with me," she told me. I had tried to introduce myself to her mother, who instead picked up her phone, questioning my presence and motivation to the person on the other end. And in that room, as I looked around, my eyes finally landed on her father. He was sitting off to the side, closer to me than the others, calm and quiet. He was trying to entertain this little baby's toddler brother, joking around with him, using Tootsie Pops to bribe the two-year-old to sit still. I imagined he shared the women's sentiments. I made eye contact and introduced myself, saying, "We are just here for a short time to help if you need it."



His response was quiet. "Thank you," he said.

Some time later, this father would be the one to ride the bus for over an hour to come pick up his daughter from my home. He would take another hour-long trip, this time with his daughter in his arms, for a visit with her family.

What about the children in your care? Do you have the opportunity to engage with their birth fathers?

Very often, it's easy to focus on connecting with a child's birth mother. You reach out, offer services and support, or other opportunities to connect. She is automatically invited to attend appointments with doctors. But if the father is not adjudicated, or if the birth parents are not married, there is often a delay in reaching out to a child's birth father. He often must wait for the ability to participate, to see his child. How much

harder must it be for him to wait those weeks to prove to the courts what he knows in his heart? That this is his child. And that this child has been taken away. As a foster parent, you have the opportunity to reach out to the father of the child in your care. Invite him to take part in the life of his child by meeting him where he is now.

Some ideas for connecting with Dad may be different than with Mom, while some are likely the same. Start with the simple things:

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From Dad to Dad

Let's be honest, foster dads don't often get their due recognition. There aren't many foster dad support groups or "Dad's Night Out" for foster dads. But the truth is, foster dads are out there, in full force, providing invaluable love, nurturing, and guidance to children and youth in care. We asked some foster dads what tips they had for other men considering fostering. Here's what they had to say:

- "You can't give from what you don't have, so you have to take care of yourself. Hit the gym, grease it up under the hood, paint, create, meditate, have a few with the guys at your favorite pub, get involved at your place of worship . . . whatever you have to do to fill your soul, do it. I get it. It's hard. It's easier to say 'meh, life's too busy right now. I don't have time' or any other half-true excuse. But listen, if you don't do you then everybody loses . . . most especially your kiddos. So take care of yourself."

- "You may have to work a bit harder to be taken seriously. This means speaking up during home visits and team meetings to make sure workers know you're fully engaged in the care of the kids. Don't sit back and let your wife do all the talking."

- "If you have a choice of licensing agencies, interview as many as possible to see what their attitudes are toward single guys fostering. There are still people out there who are going to question your motives. If it's not feeling right, move on."

- "Take advantage of opportunities, like training or foster care events, to connect with other dads. We need to support one another."



- "Tone it down. I'll admit I tend to get loud when I'm frustrated with the kids. But yelling just doesn't work. So chill. You don't talk to your wife/partner or co-workers that way. You wouldn't tolerate it from others. It's a potential trigger for all kinds of dark memories for our kids. Take a deep breath in, walk to the other room and collect yourself, and come back in control with gentleness. That's showing [the child] a good father more than loud ever could."

- "Make sure you're in a place in your life where the kids are your top and only priority. If you're single and not happy about it, you probably want to wait until you're in a stable relationship before fostering. The kids need no less than all you've got."

- "You may get a worker who will expect you to think like a mom. You may have times when you need to remind your worker that you are not a mom. Men

and women do things differently. That doesn't mean your way is wrong."

- "Don't be afraid to admit when you've made a mistake. It doesn't make you weak, it makes you human. And it makes it easier for kids to admit when they've made mistakes."

- "A lot of the kids in foster care haven't had males in their lives. It's going to be an adjustment for them. Be patient."

- "If you have it in your heart to foster, don't let anyone's stereotypes get in your way. The kids need us."



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- **Call him.** Give Dad your contact information right away, like you would do with Mom. You can also encourage him to call you for updates about his child, or even to check on or talk to the child. If Dad isn't the type to talk on the phone, maybe he would be willing to write letters or emails to his child that way, instead.
- **Encourage/help set up visits.** If Mom and Dad are not living together, or if Dad has his own visits, you might offer to bring the child to a visit. By doing so, it can give you and Dad an opportunity to get to know one another better and build your relationship.
- **Send pictures frequently.**
- **Ask about family traditions.** What types of things does he do with his child on birthdays or holidays?
- **Ask about other "traditions."** Are there some things Dad did with his child that are special and that he would like to continue? Maybe they read together – a specific book or story, or different ones each time – or went out to a certain restaurant once a month or played a special game together.



offer him every opportunity that Mom has. Here are a few ideas of how you might engage with Dad:

- If the child placed with you is interested in sports, invite Dad to a practice or game.
Evening Recreation
Department sports are held in great locations like parks, and they will get to see their kids doing something they love.
- Send Dad a homemade gift for Father's Day. Handprints and personal crafts are a great way to send a parent a gift from their child.
- Get to know his extended family. Is there a grandma on his side that would like to know how her grandchild is doing? (Be sure to run contact by the case manager before reaching out to ensure they are a safe and appropriate contact.)

Openness, in general, can be scary; the unknown is intimidating. But taking the risk, for the benefit of the child in your care, is worth it.

Your communication may be key, as Mom may or may not share messages or information about the child with Dad. In some cases, forming a relationship with Dad may be easier than with Mom. Moreover, he may be the key to creating a parenting partnership and establishing a level of trust with Mom.

However, engaging and building a relationship with the father of the child in your care may mean taking a look at any bias you may have. Give some careful thought to anything that may be holding you back from engaging with Dad. But, as long as there are no safety or legal reasons for you not to contact the child's father, we encourage you to

Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA)



WFAPA provides great opportunities to network with other foster and adoptive parents. They also have an extensive website, wfapa.org, a newsletter, and a network of supportive WFAPA members and other foster parents who can be a resource for you.



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Resources

Tip Sheets

- Somebody to Lean On: Connecting with or Creating a Support Group
<http://wifostercareandadoption.org/Reading-Room/Tip-Sheets/Taking-Care-of-Yourself/Somebody-To-Lean-On-Connecting-With-or-Creating-a-Support-Group>

Library

- *And Tango Makes Three*, by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (children's book)
- *What About the Dads?*, by K. Malm, J. Murray, and R. Green
- *Birth Fathers and Their Adoption Experiences*, by Gary Clapton
- *Fathers, Mothers, Sisters, Brothers: A Collection of Poems*, by Mary Ann Hoberman

Additional Information

- The Involved Father (Focus on the Family)
focusonthefamily.com/parenting/parenting-roles/the-involved-father/fathers-matter
- The Importance of a Father's Involvement (Parents)
parents.com/parenting/dads/issues-trends/importance-of-fathers-involvement/
- The Role of Fathers with Daughters and Sons (Parents)
parents.com/parenting/better-parenting/style/the-role-of-fathers-with-daughters-and-sons/
- The Important Role of Dad, by Dr. Gail Gross (Huffington Post Blogs)
huffingtonpost.com/dr-gail-gross/the-important-role-of-dad_b_5489093.html
- The Role Model Crisis (Father & Child)
fatherandchild.org.nz/magazine/issue-19/the-role-model-crisis/
- Why Positive Male Role Models are Vital to a Child's Development
sourcepointcoaching.com/why-possitive-male-role-models-are-vital-to-a-childs-development/
- The Importance of Male Role Models (WPRI News)
wpri.com/2014/06/16/the-importance-of-male-role-models/
- The Importance of Positive Male Role Models (First Things First)
firstthings.org/importance-of-positive-male-role-models/
- Blog: Thoughts of a Foster Dad
thoughtsofafosterdad.org/blog/
- Blog: Mr. Dad (Not adoption related, but resources for dads)
mrdad.com
- Blog: Designer Daddy (LGBT parenting topics)
designerdaddy.com
- Water Fights and Grown-Up Talk: How Dads Do It Differently (Live Science)
livescience.com/51284-fathers-mothers-parent-differently.html
- How Dads Parent Differently Than Moms (Life of Dad)
lifeofdad.com/how-dads-parent-differently-than-moms/



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Camp to Belong-Wisconsin is a six-day/five-night summer camp that reunites brothers and sisters who have been separated by the foster care system. Children 7 to 21 years of age are able to attend camp with their siblings to have fun, strengthen connections and create life-long memories together.

Where: Camp Anokiji in Plymouth, WI

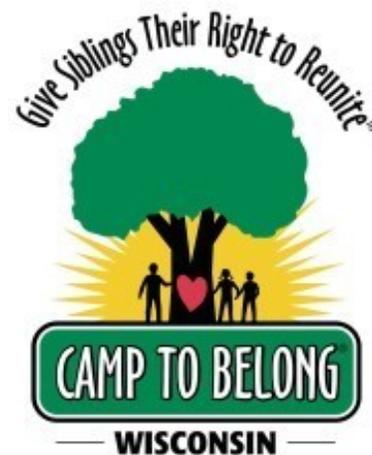
When: August 13-18, 2017

How: Caseworkers, Parents, or Foster Parents can send an inquiry email to registration@ctb-wi.org. The email should include contact information for the person making the inquiry. The referral deadline is June 30, 2017.

Once a referral has been made you will be contacted by one of the Camp Directors or a member of the Camper Selection Committee to discuss the sibling groups' eligibility for camp. If approved, an application for camp will be issued at that time.

Additional Information: Camp fees are \$500/camper. We have full scholarships available. If your sibling group is approved, we ask for your assistance to provide camper fees through state or county funds, or other types of contributions. We will work with you to identify funding sources.

This camp is designed for brothers and sisters who have been separated in the foster care system, by adoption, or other out-of-home placement. For further information, please visit ctb-wi.org.



Where to Find Us on Social Media

facebook.com/coalitionforfcyf
twitter.com/coalitionforfcyf
instagram.com/coalitionforfcyf

We are always here for additional information, resources, and support. You can contact us toll-free at **800-947-8074** or via email at **info@wifostercareandadoption.org**.



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