



**The
Coalition**
for Children, Youth & Families

Uncomfortable Conversations

without anxiety

(AND without damaging relationships)

What We'll Talk About

- What is an uncomfortable conversation and what makes it uncomfortable?
- How to establish an honest and open working relationship
- Practical proactive and preemptive strategies
- How to initiate and navigate conversations around tough issues
- Common scenarios
- Strategy sharing from the field



What We Won't Talk About

~~Licensing Decisions~~



(Well, maybe a tiny bit)



STORYTIME



Be Preemptive & Proactive

**Connection
&
Clarity**



Connection

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”



What's Connection Got to Do With It?

- Makes conversations easier when an issue comes up
- Foster parent is less likely to see you as an adversary if you need to address an issue
- They are more likely to be honest when a situation arises
- Creates trust & safety in interactions
- Makes your job easier & more enjoyable



Strategies for Connecting

- Check your biases & preconceptions
- Set a goal of connection over transaction
- Offer a sincere compliment every chance you get
- Be authentic & look for what you really like about them
- Make them feel seen, heard, understood & valued
- Recognize & emphasize their strengths



Strategies for Connecting Cont.

- Listen for what matters to them; what they honor & value
- Find common ground or interest
- Acknowledge & appreciate their honesty & vulnerability
- Use supportive language:
 - I'd like to hear your thoughts on ...
 - I want to make sure I understand...



LA Helpful Tip:
Approach the relationship as you
would if they were caring for your child



What If ...

What if despite all your efforts to build a trusting and respectful relationship, the connection just isn't happening?

- Keep trying anyway
- Behavior is communication. Listen for what may be behind the behavior (e.g., Ulterior motives? Bias? Triggers? Personal history?)
- Ask them to keep documentation of their concerns with dates and times (e.g., they're having issues with birth parent)
- Remember, they have the biggest responsibility, but the least control
- Keep bringing conversations back to what's best for the child(ren)



Clarity

Clarity and agreement *in every stage of the relationship* provides a touchstone to return to if an issue arises.

- The purpose and goals of foster care (child centered, reunification)
- This is a professional license. As such we need to adhere to rules and regulations.
- Key expectations (i.e., supporting reunification, shared parenting, preserving family culture, cooperation, compliance, communication)
- Child focus/ Best Interest
- Respective roles and responsibilities of all parties (i.e., what foster parents should or should not be doing)



Tip to Consider

Create a checklist document that outlines expectations, goals, roles and rules. Discuss that these were established in the best interest of the child. Have the foster parent sign it. Review it with them periodically. Then, when an issue arises, you have the document to fall back on.

“If you recall, we discussed that ... because it is what’s best for the child.”



Communication Styles

Expressive

Verbally-aggressive

Questioning

Precise

Emotional

Assertive

Manipulative

Passive-aggressive

Analytical

Intuitive

Personal

Functional

Do you know your communication style? Below are links to some fun, free communication style quizzes:

Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.co...>

Personality Lingo Communication Style Quiz: <https://personalitylingo.com/f...>

verywellMind Quiz: <https://www.verywellmind.com/t...>



Most Effective Communication

ASSERTIVE

Assertive communication is considered the most effective style because it balances clarity, respect, and confidence. It fosters trust, resolves conflict efficiently, and ensures needs are met with fairness and honesty. Assertive communicators set good boundaries and aim for a win/win resolution.



As Brene Brown Says:

Clear is
Kind.
Unclear is
Unkind.

This means:

Setting clear expectations, providing honest feedback and defining boundaries is more compassionate than being vague to avoid discomfort.



Issues You're Seeing?

- Safety (e.g., allowing unauthorized contact, unsanitary conditions)
- Failure to follow agency/state regulations
- Non-Compliance (e.g., training hours, medical appointments, visits)
- Unauthorized Household members
- Background check (e.g., a new arrest that wasn't communicated)
- Boundaries
- Communication (non-responsive, missed appointments)
- Dishonesty, misleading or omitted information
- Failure to report (e.g., no notification of changes or incidents)
- Illegal activity (e.g., drug use in the home)
- Discipline practices
- Refusal to work with birth family
- Mental health or substance use



A Word on Boundaries

“It’s easy for boundaries to get blurred when you’re a foster parent. Think about what we’re asked to do. Love them like our own, but don’t get too attached. Help them heal, but mind your own business when you see them get hurt. Be the person who cares for them day to day and knows their needs, but let others make the decisions. Have all the responsibility, but none of the control. Extend the parents kindness, but don’t cross any lines. Give the children safety & stability, while living with chaos and uncertainty. Turn your life upside down, but stay on top of everything. Be prepared to keep them if things don’t work out, be prepared to have your heart shattered in a million pieces if they do.”



Preparing for the Conversation

- Check your bias
- Stay focused on child centered objectives
- Set an intention for a win/win resolution
- Be prepared to *really* listen & make them feel heard
- Come prepared to advocate for child, not argue
- Set the tone by approaching from a calm, centered place
- Practice (and imagine it going well)



Preparing Cont.

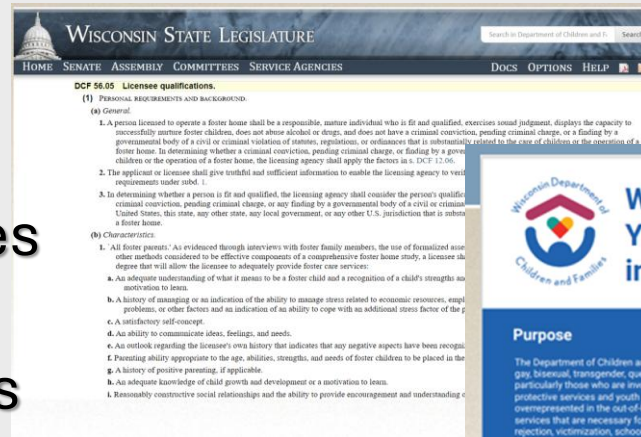
- Mentally rehearse the conversation with a positive outcome
- Aim for consensus building
- Be prepared to start and end the conversation by noting their strengths, progress & accomplishments with the child
- Assume a shared goal of the child's best interest (e.g., I know we all want what's best for Bob...")
- Keep bringing the conversation back to what's best for the child
- Bring supporting documentation, just in case ...



Preparing Documentation

Prepare for the conversation by gathering documentation to reference. This may include:

- Chapter 56
- Chapter 48
- Agency/County Policies
- Prudent Parenting
- Documented incidents
- Case Notes
- Meeting Notes



Working with LGBTQ+ Youth and Families in Child Welfare

Purpose

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) plays an integral role in ensuring the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other identified LGBTQ+ youth in the state of Wisconsin, particularly those who are involved in or at risk of involvement in the child welfare system via child protective services and youth justice. National data indicates that LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately overrepresented in the out-of-home care population.¹ These children often do not receive affirming care and services that are necessary for their safety and well-being. LGBTQ+ youth are at a heightened risk for family rejection, victimization, school bullying, sex trafficking, substance abuse, suicidality, hospitalization, and homelessness.

Commitment

The Division of Safety and Permanence (DSP) acknowledges and commits to meeting the needs of these youth and their families within our systems and is dedicated to ensuring our policies and programs advance the priority of building affirming and inclusive environments and communities for LGBTQ+ youth and their families to thrive.

Background

National estimates indicate that of children aged 12 and over in out-of-home care, 19.1% identify as LGBTQ+.² Using this calculation, DSP would estimate that of the 2,024 Wisconsin youth aged 12+ in out-of-home care, approximately 386 of those youth may self-identify as LGBTQ+ (estimates as of February 2022). This evaluation is a conservative approximation as these numbers only reflect youth 12 and older currently placed in out-of-home care. Furthermore, data about a youth's sexual orientation, or gender identity is not consistently captured in eWISACWIS, the state's child welfare case management system; therefore, the actual number of youth who identify as LGBTQ+ is not known in our current system and any estimation provided is likely to be an underestimation.

Lesbian
Gay
Bisexual
Transgender
Queer/Questioning
+ All Other Groups

DCF Expectations: LGBTQIA+ Youth

“... dedicated to ensuring our policies and programs advance the priority of building affirming and inclusive environments and communities for LGBTQ+ youth and their families to thrive.”

Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard Defined:

Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standard (RPPS):
A standard for an out-of-home care provider to use in making decisions concerning a child's participation in **age and developmentally appropriate** extracurricular, enrichment, cultural, and social activities that is characterized by careful and sensible parental decisions that maintain the health, safety, best interest, and cultural, religious, and tribal values of the child, while at the same time encouraging the emotional and developmental growth of a child.

Beginning the Conversation

- Frame it in positive shared intentions and benefits to the child. (e.g., “I want to have this conversation because ... best for Bob .”)
- Point out foster parent strengths (e.g., “Bob has made some great progress in your care ...”)
- Be empathetic and acknowledge their hard work
- Refer back to previously discussed, expectations & goals
- Use “I” statements and non-threatening language such as “I realize this has been difficult and ...”
- Provide documentation when available & necessary



Strategies & Brain Hacks for Best Results



Listen More Than Talk

With this strategy, your focus is on intentional listening and observation. You don't need to over explain, defend or justify

Offers opportunity for deeper understanding

You get a chance to ask clarifying questions

Harder to misinterpret or make up our own story

They are more likely to listen to *you* if they feel heard

Talking less and listening more helps us to remain calm



Pre-pave with Visualization

With this strategy, you go into the conversation having already imagined it going well and having a positive outcome.

It primes the brain for emotional regulation

You approach the conversation calm & with less anxiety

Expecting a positive outcome builds confidence

Others will likely co-regulate to your energy (and stay in the frontal lobe)

We see what we're looking for

It sets an intention



“I need your help with this ...”

With this strategy, you are approaching the situation as a cooperative endeavor, not as opponents.

This calms their central nervous system immediately

It makes them feel like you want their input

It makes them feel like they are a valued teammate

It sets the stage for a resolution focused conversation (not a complaint session)

It doesn't point fingers or place blame on anyone

(Conversation can end with, “I feel better, how about you?”)



Beginning & Ending

With this strategy, begin with saying what you want to talk about and how you would like the conversation to end.

Example: “I want to talk about you keeping Bob home from last weeks visit ... I want us to walk away with the shared understanding of how important they are for Bob and how we can make sure it doesn’t happen again. Sound good?”

They know what to anticipate

The tone is set for a productive conversations

The focus is on resolution

It invites the foster parent’s participation



Mirror Their Words

With this strategy, you repeat back what they say verbatim.

Example: “What I’m hearing you say is that dad hasn’t been showing up for visits and you didn’t want to disappoint Bob again by taking him. Correct?”

It triggers empathy in both parties

They feel heard & understood

It builds rapport and puts you on an even playing field

Stepping into their words, you’re getting a deeper understanding of the issue



Compassionate Curiosity

This strategy focuses on empathy & compassion, and seeks to understand why they made the choices they did.

Example: “I want you to know, I’m coming to this open minded and I really want to understand so we can come away with a resolution that’s best for Bob.”

The expressed desire to understand puts them at ease

It’s Bob focused

It offers opportunity to make they feel heard and understood

It encourages working together



Group Activity Scenario

The situation: The foster parent is creating barriers to reunification

- She is oppositional and difficult to work with
- She dislikes birth mom and makes it known
- She imposes her opinions with the case manager on how things should be done
- Uses her relationship with birth dad as a bargaining tool (e.g., tells dad that unless he leaves his wife as she thinks he should, she won't help him anymore.)
- She is saying derogatory things about birth mom in front of the children
- She won't assist with transportation and believes everything is someone else's responsibility to figure out.



Small Group Scenarios

Role Plays



Questions?



Thank You

**(You Don't have to go home
But you can't stay here)**

